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SCIENCE FICTION

APRIL 1957

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THE
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SCIENCE FICTION

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Cover by JACK COGGINS Showing
BRINGING HOME THE BACON ON VENUS

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DANGER IN THE AIR

ON THE morning of June 14, 1959, a low moved up from the south and settled over New York like a gigantic gray hen with a vast knobby egg to hatch. The city moved in its sleep, restless under the hot, heavy vaporous pinions.

At the Battery weather station, Dr. Walter Hambro found himself and his night assistant, Justin Kent, pulling for breath.

"I knew the south was eager to get rid of this stinker," complained Kent, "but they didn't have to unload it on us."

Dr. Hambro nodded uncomfortably. "It can't stay around long — that nice high developing over Springfield, Mass., dragged it up here, so they'll be the victims next."

They checked the charts. That nice high over Springfield had come down from the clouds.

"There must be another around somewhere," Dr. Hambro said, and searched for one.

From one coast to the other and from the Gulf to the border, the atmosphere was as relaxed as if it had been filled with Equanil. The single promising spot was in Canada, heading toward Greenland. It couldn't have been drawn south even if every vacuum cleaner in the state

stood bag to bag and inhaled all at once.

"We're stuck," said Dr. Hambro. "This is the low that came to dinner."

Factories in and around the city stoked up for the day's production. Sam Williams, chief fireman for Lipp Novelties, summed up his colleagues' problems in his report to Arnold Lloyd, v-p in charge of manufacturing: "The coal just lays there and smokes like it was tobacco in a pipe somebody was too lazy to clean. No updraft worth a damn."

This fact was also noted by Sven Hansen, janitor for the Flatbush Arms. Fumes overcame him before he could make his report to anyone. His dog, Loki, gave warning, but against a rescue party of milkman, doorman and garbage collector, whom he held at bay until lured out of the way with a bone from the garbage truck.

At the airports on the outskirts of the city, the ceiling was low, but not low enough to impede traffic. After a number of takeoffs, however, all fields were blanketed by exhaust fumes, which sullenly refused to move away. Visibility at 7:57 A.M. was worse than zero; all personnel

(Continued on page 115)

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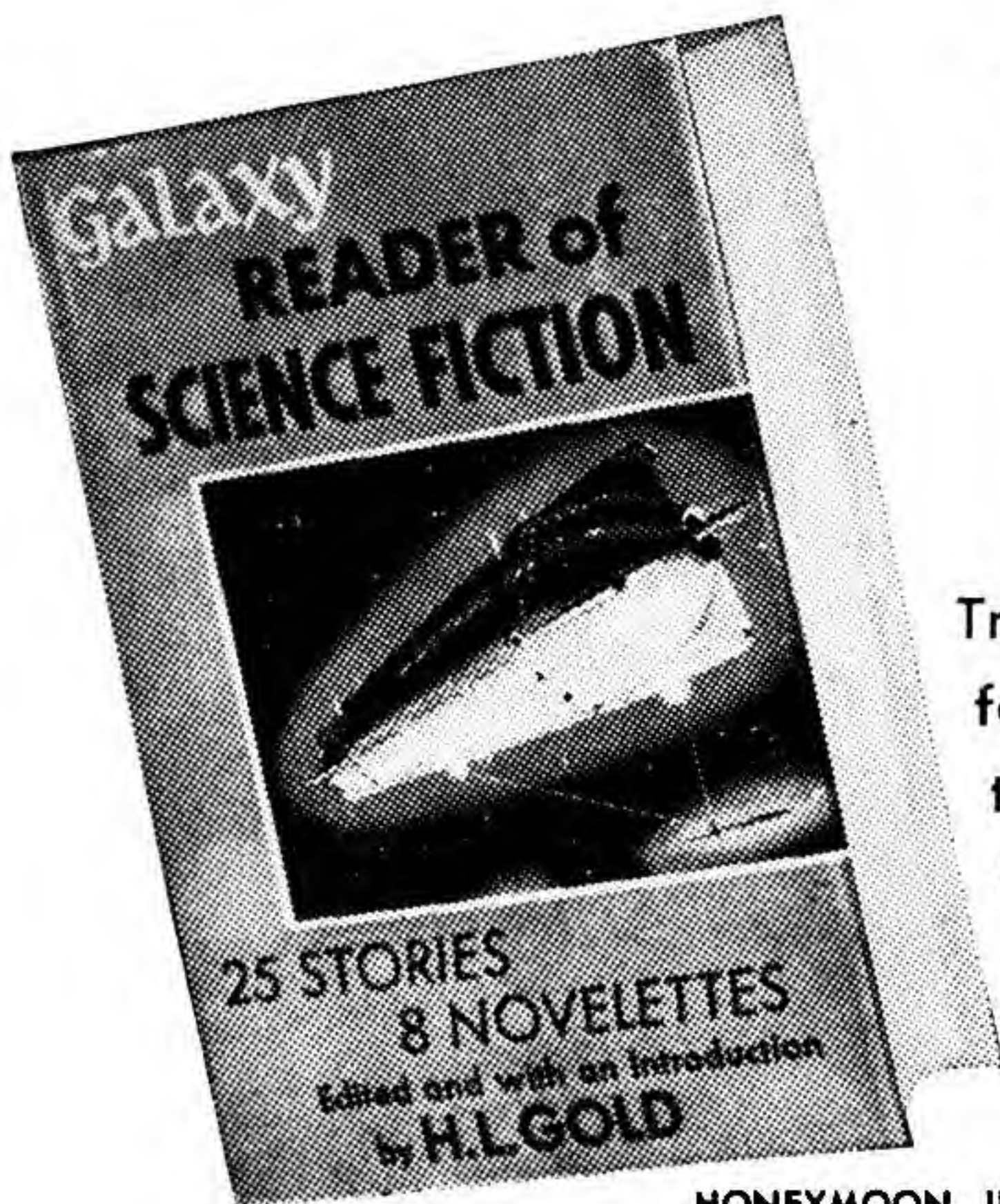
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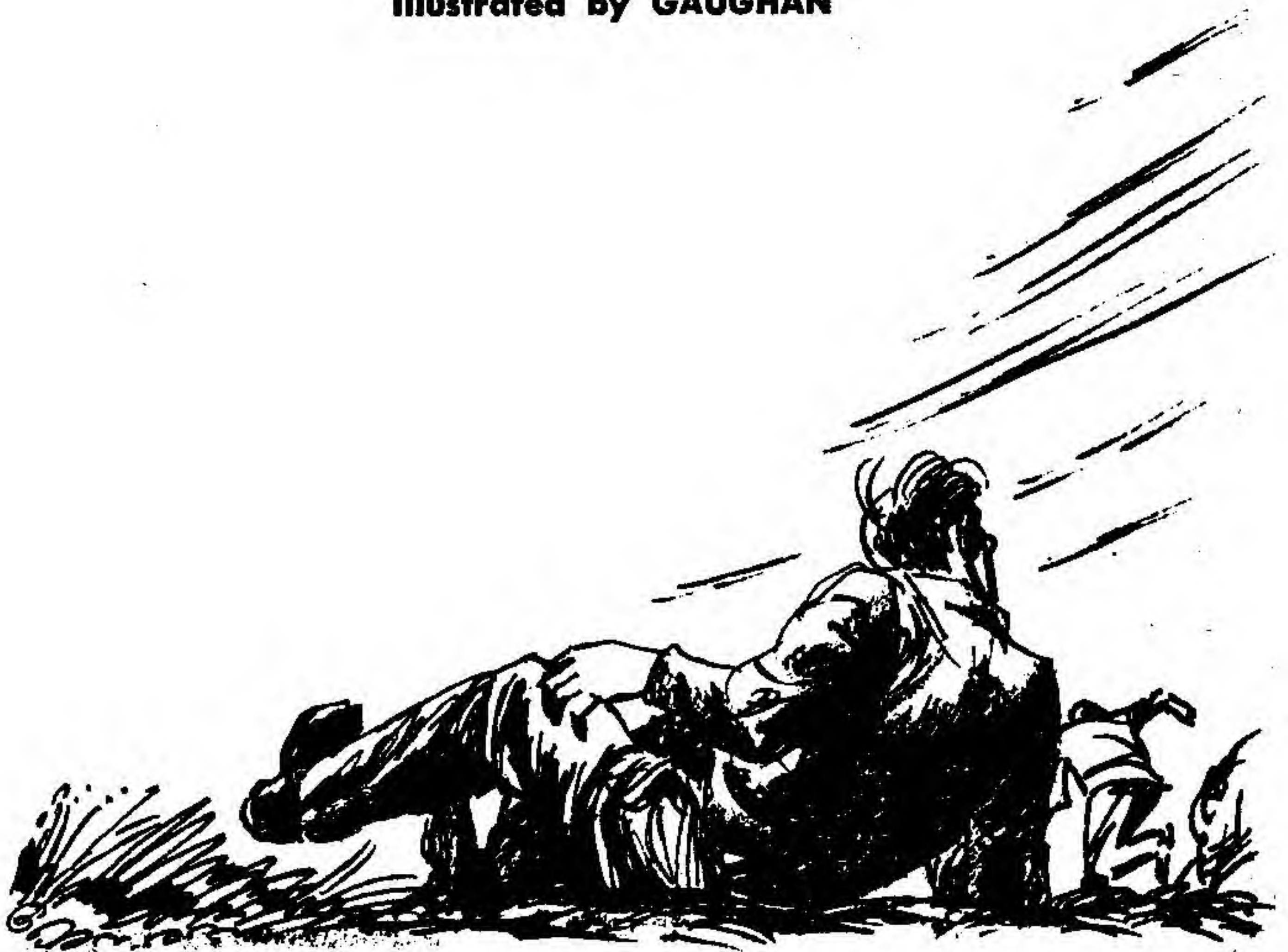
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Man's best friend is a — a what? The answer was so vital that every possible resource that could be found had to be poured into:

Operation Stinky

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

Illustrated by GAUGHAN



GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION

I WAS sitting on the back stoop of my shack, waiting for the jet, with the shotgun at my right hand and a bottle at my left, when the dogs began the ruckus.

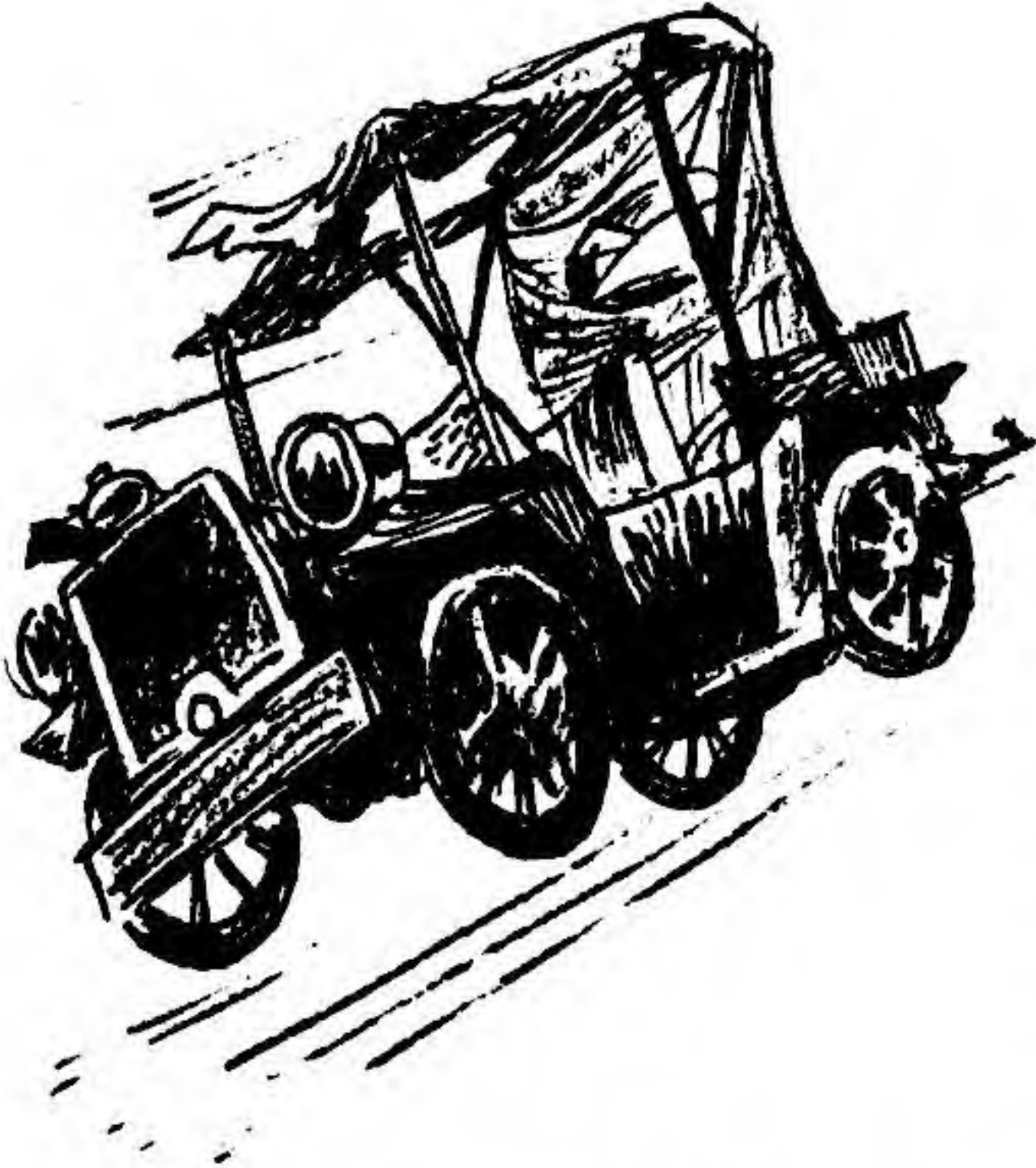
I took a quick swig from the bottle and lumbered to my feet. I grabbed a broom and went around the house.

From the way that they were yapping, I knew the dogs had cornered one of the skunks again and those skunks were jittery enough from the jets without being pestered further.

I walked through the place where the picket fence had fallen down and peered around the corner of the shack. It was getting dusk, but I could see three dogs circling the lilac thicket and, from the sound of it, another had burrowed halfway into it. I knew that if I didn't put an end to it, all hell was bound to pop.

I tried to sneak up on them, but I kept stumbling over old tin cans and empty bottles and I decided then and there, come morning, I'd get that yard cleaned up. I had studied on doing it before, but it seemed there always was some other thing to do.

With all the racket I was making, the three dogs outside the thicket scooted off, but the one that had pushed into the lilacs was having trouble backing out. I zeroed in on him and smacked



him dead center with the broom. The way he got out of there—well, he was one of those loose-skinned dogs and for a second, I swear, it looked like he was going to leave without his hide.

He was yelping and howling and he came popping out like a cork out of a bottle and he ran straight between my legs. I tried to keep my balance, but I stepped on an empty can and sat down undignified. The fall knocked the breath out of me and I seemed to have some trouble getting squared around so I could get on my feet again.

WHILE I was getting squared around, a skunk walked out of the lilac bush and came straight toward me. I tried to shoo him off, but he wouldn't shoo. He was waving his tail and he seemed happy to find me there and he walked right up and rubbed against me, purring very loudly.

I didn't move a muscle. I didn't even bat my eyes. I figured if I didn't move, he might go away. The skunks had been living under the shack for the last three years or so and we got along fine, but we had never been what you'd call real close. I'd left them alone and they'd left me alone and we both were satisfied.

But this happy little critter apparently had made up his mind that I was a friend. Maybe he

was just plumb grateful to me for running off the dogs.

He walked around me, rubbing against me, and then he climbed up in my lap and put his feet against my chest and looked me in the face. I could feel his body vibrating with the purring noise that he was making.

He kept standing there, with his feet against my chest, looking in my face, and his purring kept getting soft and loud, fast and slow. His ears stood straight up, like he expected me to purr back at him, and all the time his tail kept up its friendly waving.

Finally I reached up a hand, very gingerly, and patted him on the head and he didn't seem to mind. I sat there quite a while, patting him and him purring at me, and he still was friendly.

So I took a chance and pushed him off my lap.

After a couple of tries, I made it to my feet and walked around the shack, with the skunk following at my heels.

I sat down on the stoop again and reached for the bottle and took a healthy swig, which I really needed after all I had been through, and while I had the bottle tilted, the jet shot across the treeline to the east and zoomed above my clearing and the whole place jumped a foot or two.

I dropped the bottle and grabbed the gun, but the jet was

gone before I got the barrel up.

I put down the gun and did some steady cussing.

I had told the colonel only the day before that if that jet ever flew that close above my shack again, I'd take a shot at it and I meant every word of it.

"It don't seem right," I told him. "A man settles down and builds himself a shack and is living peaceable and contented and ain't bothering no one. Then the government comes in and builds an air base just a couple miles away and there ain't no peace no more, with them jets flying no more than stove-pipe high. Sometimes at night they bring a man plumb out of bed, standing at attention in the middle of the room, with his bare feet on the cold floor."

The colonel had been real nice about it. He had pointed out how we had to have air bases, how our lives depended on the planes that operated out of them and how hard he was trying to arrange the flight patterns so they wouldn't upset folks who lived around the base.

I HAD told him how the jets were stirring up the skunks and he hadn't laughed, but had been sympathetic, and he told me how, when he was a boy in Texas, he had trapped a lot of skunks. I explained that I wasn't trapping

these skunks, but that they were, you might say, sort of living with me, and how I had become attached to them, how I'd lay awake at night and listen to them moving around underneath the shack and when I heard them, I knew I wasn't alone, but was sharing my home with others of God's creatures.

But even so, he wouldn't promise that the jets would stop flying over my place and that was when I told him I'd take a shot at the next one that did.

So he pulled a book out of his desk and read me a law that said it was illegal to shoot at any aircraft, but he didn't scare me none.

So what happens when I lay for a jet? It passes over while I'm taking me a drink.

I quit my cussing when I remembered the bottle, and when I thought of it, I could hear it gurgling. It had rolled underneath the steps and I couldn't get at it right away and I almost went mad listening to it gurgle.

Finally I laid down on my belly and reached underneath the steps and got it, but it had gurgled dry. I tossed it out into the yard and sat down on the steps, glum.

The skunk came out of the darkness and climbed the stairs and sat down beside me. I reached out and patted him kind of absent-minded and he purred back

at me. I stopped fretting about the bottle.

"You sure are a funny skunk," I said. "I never knew skunks purred."

We sat there for a while and I told him all about my trouble with the jets, the way a man will when there's nobody better around than an animal to do the listening, and sometimes even when there is.

I wasn't afraid of him no more and I thought how fine it was that one of them had finally gotten friendly. I wondered if maybe, now that the ice was broken, some of them might not come in and live with me instead of living under the shack.

Then I got to thinking what a story I'd have to tell the boys down at the tavern. Then I realized that no matter how much I swore to it, they wouldn't believe a word of what I said. So I decided to take the proof along.

I picked up the friendly skunk and I said to it: "Come along. I want to show you to the boys."

I bumped against a tree and got tangled up in an old piece of chicken wire out in the yard, but finally made it out front where I had Old Betsy parked.

BETSY wasn't the newest or the best car ever made, but she was the most faithful that any man could want. Me and her had

been through a lot together and we understood each other. We had a sort of bargain—I polished and fed her and she took me where I wanted to go and always brought me back. No reasonable man can ask more of a car than that.

I patted her on the fender and said good evening to her, put the skunk in the front seat and climbed in myself.

Betsy didn't want to start. She'd rather just stayed home. But I talked to her and babied her and she finally started, shaking and shivering and flapping her fenders.

I eased her into gear and headed her out into the road.

"Now take it easy," I told her. "The state coppers have got themselves a speed trap set up somewhere along this stretch and we don't want to take no chances."

Betsy took it slow and gentle down to the tavern and I parked her there and tucked the skunk under my arm and went into the place.

Charley was behind the bar and there were quite a lot of customers—Johnny Ashland and Skinny Patterson and Jack O'Neill and half a dozen others.

I put the skunk on the bar and it started walking toward them, just like it was eager to make friends with them.

They took one look and they

made foxholes under chairs and tables. Charley grabbed a bottle by the neck and backed into a corner.

"Asa," he yelled, "you take that thing out of here!"

"It's all right," I told him. "It's a friendly cuss."

"Friendly or not, get the hell out with it!"

"Get it out!" yelled all the customers.

I was plenty sore at them. Imagine being upset at a friendly skunk!

But I could see I was getting nowhere, so I picked it up and took it out to Betsy. I found a gunny sack and made a nest and told it to stay right there, that I'd be right back.

It took me longer than I had intended, for I had to tell my story and they asked a lot of questions and made a lot of jokes and they wouldn't let me buy, but kept them set up for me.

When I went out, I had some trouble spotting Betsy and then I had to set a course to reach her. It took a little time, but after tacking back and forth before the wind, I finally got close enough in passing to reach out and grab her.

I had trouble getting in because the door didn't work the way it should, and when I got in, I couldn't find the key. When I found it, I dropped it on the

floor, and when I reached down to get it, I fell flat upon the seat. It was so comfortable there that I decided it was foolish to get up. I'd just spend the night there.

While I was lying there, Betsy's engine started and I chuckled. Betsy was disgusted and was going home without me. That's the kind of car she was. Just like a wife'd act.

SHE backed out and made a turn and headed for the road. At the road, she stopped and looked for other cars, then went out on the highway, heading straight for home.

I wasn't worried any. I knew I could trust Betsy. We'd been through a lot together and she was intelligent, although I couldn't remember she'd ever gone home all by herself before.

I lay there and thought about it and the wonder of it was, I told myself, that it hadn't happened long before.

A man is as close to no machine as he is to his car. A man gets to understand his car and his car gets to understand him and after a time a real affection must grow up between them. So it seemed absolutely natural to me that the day had to come when a car could be trusted just the way a horse or dog is, and that a good car should be as loyal and faithful as any dog or horse.

I lay there feeling happy and Betsy went head high down the road and turned in at the driveway.

But we had no more than stopped when there was a squeal of brakes and I heard a car door open and someone jump out on the gravel.

I tried to get up, but I was a bit slow about it and someone jerked the door open and reached in and grabbed me by the collar and hauled me out.

The man wore the uniform of a state trooper and there was another trooper just a little ways away and the police car stood there with its red light flashing. I wondered why I hadn't noticed it had been following us and then remembered I'd been lying down.

"Who was driving that car?" barked the cop who was holding me.

Before I could answer, the other cop looked inside Betsy and jumped back about a dozen feet.

"Slade!" he yelled. "There's a skunk in there!"

"Don't tell me," said Slade, "that the skunk was driving."

And the other one said, "At least the skunk is sober."

"You leave that skunk alone!" I told them. "He's a friend of mine. He isn't bothering no one."

I gave a jerk and Slade's hand slipped from my collar and I

lunged for Betsy. My chest hit the seat and I grabbed the steering post and tried to pull myself inside.

Betsy started up with a sudden roar and her wheels threw gravel that hit the police car like machine-gun fire. She lurched forward and crashed through the picket fence, curving for the road. She smashed into the lilac thicket and went through it and I was brushed off.

I lay there, all tangled up with the smashed-down lilac bushes and watched Betsy hit the road and keep on going. She had done the best she could, I consoled myself. She had tried to rescue me and it wasn't her fault that I had failed to hang onto her. Now she had to make a run for it herself. And she seemed to be doing pretty well. She sounded and went like she had an engine off a battleship inside her.

THE two state troopers jumped into their car and took off in pursuit and I settled down to figure out how to untangle myself from the lilac thicket.

I finally managed it and went over to the front steps of the shack and sat down. I got to thinking about the fence and decided it wasn't worth repairing. I might just as well uproot it and use what was left of it for kindling.

And I wondered about Betsy and what might be happening to her, but I wasn't really worried. I was pretty sure she could take care of herself.

I was right about that, for in a little while the state troopers came back again and parked in the driveway. They saw me sitting on the steps and came over to me.

"Where's Betsy?" I asked them.

"Betsy who?" Slade asked.

"Betsy is the car," I said.

Slade swore. "Got away. Traveling without lights at a hundred miles an hour. It'll smash into something, sure as hell."

I shook my head at that. "Not Betsy. She knows all the roads for fifty miles around."

Slade thought I was being smart. He grabbed me and jerked me to my feet. "You got a lot to explain." He shoved me at the other trooper and the other trooper caught me. "Toss him in the back seat, Ernie, and let's get going."

Ernie didn't seem to be as sore as Slade. He said: "This way, Pop."

Once they got me in the car, they didn't want to talk with me. Ernie rode in back with me and Slade drove. We hadn't gone a mile when I dozed off.

When I woke up, we were just pulling into the parking area in front of the state police barracks.

I got out and tried to walk, but one of them got on each side of me and practically dragged me along.

We went into a sort of office with a desk, some chairs and a bench. A man sat behind the desk.

"What you got there?" he asked.

"Damned if I know," said Slade, all burned up. "You won't believe it, Captain."

Ernie took me over to a chair and sat me down. "I'll get you some coffee, Pop. We want to talk with you. We have to get you sober."

I thought that was nice of him.

I drank a lot of coffee and I began to see a little better and things were in straight lines instead of going round in circles — things I could see, that is. It was different when I tried to think. Things that had seemed okay before now seemed mighty queer, like Betsy going home all by herself, for instance.

FINALLY they took me over to the desk and the captain asked me a lot of questions about who I was and how old I was and where I lived, until eventually we got around to what was on their minds.

I didn't hold back anything. I told them about the jets and the skunks and the talk I had with

the colonel. I told them about the dogs and the friendly skunk and how Betsy had got disgusted with me and gone home by herself.

"Tell me, Mr. Bayles," said the captain, "are you a mechanic? I know you told me you are a day laborer and work at anything that you can get. But I wonder if you might not tinker around in your spare time, working on your car."

"Captain," I told him truthfully, "I wouldn't know which end of a wrench to grab hold of."

"You never worked on Betsy, then?"

"Just took good care of her."

"Has anyone else ever worked on her?"

"I wouldn't let no one lay a hand on her."

"Then you can't explain how that car could possibly operate by itself?"

"No, sir. Betsy is a smart car, Captain —"

"You're sure you weren't driving?"

"I wasn't driving. I was just taking it easy while Betsy took me home."

The captain threw down his pencil in disgust. "I give up!"

He got up from the desk. "I'm going out and make some more coffee," he said to Slade. "You see what you can do."

"There's one thing," Ernie said

to Slade as the captain left. "The skunk —"

"What about the skunk?"

"Skunks don't wave their tails," said Ernie. "Skunks don't purr."

"This skunk did," Slade said sarcastically. "This was a special skunk. This was a ring-tailed wonder of a skunk. Besides, the skunk hasn't got a thing to do with it. He was just out for a ride."

"You boys haven't got a little nip?" I asked. I was feeling mighty low.

"Sure," said Ernie. He went to a locker in one corner of the room and took out a bottle.

Through the windows, I could see that the east was beginning to brighten. Dawn wasn't far away.

THE telephone rang. Slade picked it up.

Ernie motioned to me and I walked across to where he stood by the locker. He handed me the bottle.

"Take it easy, Pop," he advised me. "You don't want to hang one on again."

I took it easy. About a tumbler and a half, I'd reckon.

Slade hollered, "Hey!" at us.

"What's going on?" asked Ernie.

He took the bottle from me, not by force exactly, but almost.

"A farmer found the car," said Slade. "It took a shot at his dog."

"It took a what — a shot at his dogs?" Ernie stuttered.

"That's what the fellow says. Went out to get in the cows. Early. Going fishing and was anxious to get the morning chores done. Found what he thought was an abandoned car at the end of a lane."

"And the shot?"

"I'm coming to that. Dog ran up barking. The car shot out a spark — a big spark. It knocked the dog over. He got up and ran. Car shot out another spark. Caught him in the rump. Fellow says the pooch is blistered."

Slade headed for the door. "Come on, the both of you."

"We may need you, Pop," said Ernie.

We ran out and piled into the car.

"Where is this farm?" asked Ernie.

"Out west of the air base," said Slade.

The farmer was waiting for us at the barnyard gate. He jumped in when Slade stopped.

"The car's still there," he said. "I been watching. It hasn't come out."

"Any other way it could get out?"

"Nope. Woods and fields is all. That lane is dead end."

Slade grunted in satisfaction. He drove down the road and ran the police car across the mouth

of the lane, blocking it entirely.

"We walk from here," he said.

"Right around that bend," the farmer told us.

We walked around the bend and saw it was Betsy, all right.

"That's my car," I said.

"Let's scatter out a bit," said Slade. "It might start shooting at us."

He loosened the gun in his holster.

"Don't you go shooting up my car," I warned him, but he paid me no mind.

Like he said, we scattered out a bit, the four of us, and went toward the car. It seemed funny that we should be acting that way, as if Betsy was an enemy and we were stalking her.

She looked the same as ever, just an old beat-up jalopy that had a lot of sense and a lot of loyalty. And I kept thinking about how she always got me places and always got me back.

Then all at once she charged us. She was headed in the wrong direction and she was backing up, but she charged us just the same.

She gave a little leap and was running at full speed and going faster every second and I saw Slade pull his gun.

I JUMPED out in the middle of the lane and waved my arms. I didn't trust that Slade. I was afraid that if I couldn't get

Betsy stopped, he'd shoot her full of holes.

But Betsy didn't stop. She kept right on charging us and she was going faster than an old wreck like her had any right to go.

"Jump, you fool!" shouted Ernie. "She'll run over you!"

I jumped, but my heart wasn't in the jump. I thought that if things had come to the pass where Betsy'd run me down, there wasn't too much left for me to go on living for.

I stubbed my toe and fell flat on my face, but even while I was falling, I saw Betsy leave the ground as if she was going to leap over me. I knew right away that I'd never been in any danger, that Betsy never had any intention of hitting me at all.

She sailed right up into the sky, with her wheels still spinning, as if she was backing up a long, steep hill that was invisible.

I twisted around and sat up and stared at her and she sure was a pretty sight. She was flying just like an airplane. I was downright proud of her.

Slade stood with his mouth open and his gun hanging at his side. He never even tried to fire it. He probably forgot that he even had a gun in his hand.

Betsy went up above the tree-line and the Sun made her sparkle and gleam—I'd polished her only the week before last—and

I thought how swell it was she had learned to fly.

It was then I saw the jet and I tried to yell a warning for Betsy, but my mouth dried up like there was alum in it and the yell wouldn't come out.

It didn't take more than a second, probably, although it seemed to me that days passed while Betsy hung there and the jet hung there and I knew they would crash.

Then there were pieces flying all over the sky and the jet was smoking and heading for a cornfield off to the left of us.

I sat there limp in the middle of the lane and watched the pieces that had been Betsy falling back to Earth and I felt sick. It was an awful thing to see.

The pieces came down and you could hear them falling, thudding on the ground, but there was one piece that didn't fall as fast as the others. It just seemed to glide.

I watched, wondering why it glided while all the other pieces fell and I saw it was a fender and that it seemed to be rocking back and forth, as if it wanted to fall, too, only something held it back.

It glided down to the ground near the edge of the woods. It landed easy and rocked a little, then tipped over. And when it tipped over, it spilled something out of it. The thing got up and

shook itself and trotted straight into the woods.

It was the friendly skunk!

BY THIS time, everyone was running. Ernie was running for the farmhouse to phone the base about the jet and Slade and the farmer were running toward the cornfield, where the jet had plowed a path in the corn wide enough to haul a barn through.

I got up and walked off the lane to where I had seen some pieces falling. I found a few of them—a headlight, the lens not even broken, and a wheel, all caved in and twisted, and the radiator ornament. It knew it was no use. No one could ever get Betsy back together.

I stood there with the radiator ornament in my hand and thought of all the good times Betsy and I had had together—how she'd take me to the tavern and wait until I was ready to go home, and how we'd go fishing and eat a picnic lunch together, and how we'd go up north deer hunting in the fall.

While I was standing there, Slade and the farmer came down from the cornfield with the pilot walking between them. He was sort of rubber-legged and they were holding him up. He had a glassy look in his eyes and he was babbling a bit.

When they reached the lane,

they let loose of him and he sat down heavily.

"When the hell," he asked them, "did they start making flying cars?"

They didn't answer him. Instead, Slade yelled at me, "Hey, Pop! You leave that wreckage alone. Don't touch none of it."

"I got a right to touch it," I told him. "It's my car."

"You leave it alone! There's something funny going on here. That junk might tell us what it is if no one monkeys with it."

So I dropped the radiator ornament and went back to the lane.

The four of us sat down and waited. The pilot seemed to be all right. He had a cut above one eye and some blood had run down across his face, but that was all that was the matter with him. He asked for a cigarette and Slade gave him one and lit it.

Down at the end of the lane, we heard Ernie backing the police car out of the way. Pretty soon he came walking up to us.

"They'll be here right away."

He sat down with us. We didn't say anything about what had happened. I guess we were all afraid to talk.

In less than fifteen minutes, the air base descended on us. First there was an ambulance and they loaded the pilot aboard and left in a lot of dust.

Behind the ambulance was a

fire rig and behind the fire rig was a jeep with the colonel in it. Behind the colonel's jeep were other jeeps and three or four trucks, all loaded with men, and in less time than it takes to tell it, the place was swarming.

THE colonel was red in the face and you could see he was upset. After all, why wouldn't he be? This was the first time a plane had ever collided in mid-air with a car.

The colonel came tramping up to Slade and he started hollering at Slade and Slade hollered right back at him and I wondered why they were sore at one another, but that wasn't it at all. That was just the way they talked when they got excited.

All around, there was a lot of running here and there and a lot more hollering, but it didn't last too long. Before the colonel got through yelling back and forth with Slade, the entire area was ringed in with men and the situation was in Air Force hands.

When the colonel finished talking with Slade, he walked over to me.

"So it was your car," he said. The way he said it, you'd thought it was my fault.

"Yes, it was," I told him, "and I'm going to sue you. That was a darn good car."

The colonel went on looking at

me as if I had no right to live, then suddenly seemed to recognize me.

"Say, wait a minute," he said. "Weren't you in to see me just the other day?"

"I sure was. I told you about my skunks. It was one of them that was in Old Betsy."

"Hold up there, old-timer," said the colonel. "You lost me. Let's hear that again."

"Old Betsy was the car," I explained, "and the skunk was in her. When your jet crashed into it, he rode a fender down."

"You mean the skunk—the fender—the —"

"It just sort of floated down," I finished telling him.

"Corporal," the colonel said to Slade, "have you further use for this man?"

"Just drunkenness," said Slade. "Not worth mentioning."

"I'd like to take him back to the base with me."

"I'd appreciate it," Slade said in a quivery kind of voice.

"Come on, then," said the colonel and I followed him to the jeep.

We sat in the back seat and a soldier drove and he didn't waste no time. The colonel and I didn't talk much. We just hung on and hoped that we'd live through it. At least, that's the way I felt.

Back at the base, the colonel sat down at his desk and pointed

at a chair for me to sit in. Then he leaned back and studied me. I was sure glad I had done nothing wrong, for the way he looked at me, I'd just have had to up and confess it if I had.

"You said some queer things back there," the colonel started. "Now suppose you just rear back comfortable in that chair and tell me all about it, not leaving out a thing."

So I told him all about it and I went into a lot of detail to explain my viewpoint and he didn't interrupt, but just sat listening. He was the best listener I ever ran across.

WHEN I was all finished, he reached for a pad and pencil.

"Let's get a few points down," he said. "You say the car had never operated by itself before?"

"Not that I know of," I answered honestly. "It might have practiced while I wasn't looking, of course."

"And it never flew before?"

I shook my head.

"And when it did both of these things, there was this skunk of yours aboard?"

"That's right."

"And you say this skunk glided down in a fender after the crash?"

"The fender tipped over and the critter ran into the woods."

"Don't you think it's a little strange that the fender should

glide down when all the other wreckage fell ker-plunk?"

I admitted that it did seem slightly strange.

"Now about this skunk. You say it purred?"

"It purred real pretty."

"And waved its tail?"

"Just like a dog," I said.

The colonel pushed the pad away and leaned back in his chair. He crossed his arms and sort of hugged himself.

"As a matter of personal knowledge," he told me, "gained from years of boyhood trapping, I can tell you that no skunk purrs or ever wags its tail."

"I know what you're thinking," I said, indignant, "but I wasn't that drunk. I'd had a drink or two to while away the time I was waiting for the jet. But I saw the skunk real plain and I knew he was a skunk and I can remember that he purred. He was a friendly cuss. He acted as if he liked me and he —"

"Okay," the colonel said. "Okay."

We sat there looking at one another. All at once, he grinned.

"You know," he said, "I find quite suddenly that I need an aide."

"I ain't joining up," I replied stubbornly. "You couldn't get me within a quarter mile of one of them jets. Not if you roped and tied me."

"A civilian aide. Three hundred a month and keep."

"Colonel, I don't hanker none for the military life."

"And all the liquor you can drink."

"Where do I sign?" I asked.

And that is how I got to be the colonel's aide.

I thought he was crazy and I still think so. He'd been a whole lot better off if he'd quit right there. But he had an idea by the tail and he was the kind of gambling fool who'd ride a hunch to death.

We got along just fine, although at times we had our differences. The first one was over that foolish business about confining me to base. I raised quite a ruckus, but he made it stick.

"You'd go out and get slobbered up and gab your head off," he told me. "I want you to button up your lip and keep it buttoned up. Why else do you think I hired you?"

IT WASN'T so bad. There wasn't a blessed thing to do. I never had to lift my hand to do a lick of work. The chow was fit to eat and I had a place to sleep and the colonel kept his word about all the liquor I could drink.

For several days, I saw nothing of him. Then one afternoon, I dropped around to pass the time of day. I hadn't more than got

there when a sergeant came in with a bunch of papers in his hand. He seemed to be upset.

"Here's the report on that car, sir," he said.

The colonel took the papers and leafed through a few of them. "Sergeant, I can't make head nor tail of this."

"Some of it I can't, either, sir."

"Now this?" said the colonel, pointing.

"That's a computer, sir."

"Cars don't have computers."

"Well, sir, that's what I said, too. But we found the place where it was attached to the engine block."

"Attached? Welded?"

"Well, not exactly welded. Like it was a part of the block. Like it had been cast as a part of it. There was no sign of welding."

"You're sure it's a computer?"

"Connally said it was, sir. He knows about computers. But it's not like any he's ever seen before. It works on a different principle than any he has seen, he says. But he says it makes a lot of sense, sir. The principle, that is. He says —"

"Well, go on!" the colonel yelled.

"He says its capacity is at least a thousand times that of the best computer that we have. He says it might not be stretching your imagination too far to say that it's intelligent."

"How do you mean—intelligent?"

"Well, Connally says a rig like that might be capable of thinking for itself, sir."

"My God!" the colonel said.

He sat there for a minute, as if he might be thinking. Then he turned a page and pointed at something else.

"That's another part, sir," the sergeant said. "A drawing of the part. We don't know what it is."

"Don't know!"

"We never saw anything like it, sir. We don't have any idea what it might be for. It was attached to the transmission, sir."

"And this?"

"That's an analysis of the gasoline. Funny thing about that, sir. We found the tank, all twisted out of shape, but there was some gas still left in it. It hadn't—"

"But why an analysis?"

"Because it's not gasoline, sir. It is something else. It was gasoline, but it's been changed, sir."

"Is that all, Sergeant?"

THE sergeant, I could see, was beginning to sweat a little. "No, sir, there's more to it. It's all in that report. We got most all the wreckage, sir. Just bits here and there are missing. We are working now on reassembling it."

"Reassembling—"

"Maybe, sir, pasting it back together is a better way to put it."

"It will never run again?"

"I don't think so, sir. It's pretty well smashed up. But if it could be put back together whole, it would be the best car that was ever made. The speedometer says 80,000 miles, but it's in new-car condition. And there are alloys in it that we can't even guess at."

The sergeant paused. "If you'll permit me, sir, it's a very funny business."

"Yes, indeed," the colonel said. "Thank you, Sergeant. A very funny business."

The sergeant turned to leave.

"Just a minute," said the colonel.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm sorry about this, Sergeant, but you and the entire detail that was assigned to the car are restricted to the base. I don't want this leaking out. Tell your men, will you? I'll make it tough on anyone who talks."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said, saluting very polite, but looking like he could have slit the colonel's throat.

When the sergeant was gone, the colonel said to me: "Asa, if there's something that you should say now and you fail to say it and it comes out later and makes a fool of me, I'll wring your scrawny little neck."

"Cross my heart," I said.

He looked at me funny. "Do you know what that skunk was?"

I shook my head.

"It wasn't any skunk," he said. "I guess it's up to us to find out what it is."

"But it isn't here. It ran into the woods."

"It could be hunted down."

"Just you and me?"

"Why just you and me when there are two thousand men right on this base?"

"But —"

"You mean they wouldn't take too kindly to hunting down a skunk?"

"Something like that, Colonel. They might go out, but they wouldn't hunt. They'd try not to find it."

"They'd hunt if there was five thousand dollars waiting for the man who brought the right one in."

I looked at him as if he'd gone off his rocker.

"Believe me," said the colonel, "it would be worth it. Every penny of it."

I told you he was crazy.

I DIDN'T go out with the skunk hunters. I knew just how little chance there was of ever finding it. It could have gotten clear out of the county by that time or found a place to hole up where one would never find it.

And, anyhow, I didn't need five thousand. I was drawing down good pay and drinking regular.

The next day, I dropped in to see the colonel. The medical officer was having words with him.

"You got to call it off!" the sawbones shouted.

"I can't call it off," the colonel yelled. "I have to have that animal."

"You ever see a man who tried to catch a skunk bare-handed?"

"No, I never have."

"I got eleven of them now," the sawbones said. "I won't have no more of it."

"Captain," said the colonel, "you may have a lot more than eleven before this is all over."

"You mean you won't call it off, sir?"

"No, I won't."

"Then I'll have it stopped."

"Captain!" said the colonel and his voice was deadly.

"You're insane," the sawbones said. "No court martial in the land —"

"Captain."

But the captain did not answer. He turned straight around and left.

The colonel looked at me. "It's sometimes tough," he said.

I knew that someone better find that skunk or the colonel's name was mud.

"What I don't understand," I said, "is why you want that skunk. He's just a skunk that purrs."

The colonel sat down at his

desk and put his head between his hands.

"My God," he moaned, "how stupid can men get?"

"Pretty stupid," I told him, "but I still don't understand —"

"Look," the colonel said, "someone jiggered up that car of yours. You say you didn't do it. You say no one else could have done it. The boys who are working on it say there's stuff in it that's not been even thought of."

"If you think that skunk —"

The colonel raised his fist and smacked it on the desk.

"Not a skunk! Something that looks like a skunk! Something that knows more about machines than you or I or any human being will ever get to know!"

"But it hasn't got no hands. How could it do what you think?"

HE NEVER got to answer. The door burst in and two of the saddest sacks outside the guardhouse stumbled in. They didn't bother to salute.

"Colonel, sir," one of them said, heaving hard. "Colonel, sir, we got one. We didn't even have to catch it. We whistled at it and it followed us."

The skunk walked in behind them, waving its tail and purring. It walked right over to me and rubbed against my legs. When I reached down and picked it up, it purred so loud I was afraid it

would go ahead and explode.

"That the one?" the colonel asked me.

"He's the one," I said.

The colonel grabbed the phone. "Get me Washington. General Sanders. At the Pentagon."

He waved his hand at us. "Get out of here!"

"But, Colonel, sir, the money —"

"You'll get it. Now get out of here."

He looked exactly like you might imagine a man might look right after he's been told he's not going to be shot at dawn.

We turned around and got out of there.

At the door, four of the toughest-looking hombres this side of Texas were waiting, with rifles in their hands.

"Don't pay no attention to us, Mac," one of them said to me. "We're just your bodyguards."

They were my bodyguards, all right. They went every place I went. And the skunk went with me, too. That, of course, was why they stuck around. They didn't care a rap about me. It was the skunk that was getting the bodyguarding.

And that skunk stuck closer to me than paper to the wall. He followed at my heels and walked between my feet, but mostly he wanted me to carry him or to let him perch on my shoulder. And he purred all the blessed time.

Either he figured I was the only true friend he had or he thought I was a soft touch.

Life got a little complicated. The skunk slept with me and the four guards stayed in the room. The skunk and one of the guards went to the latrine with me while the others kept close. I had no privacy at all. I said it wasn't decent. I said it was unconstitutional. It didn't make no difference. There was nothing I could do. There were, it turned out, twelve of them guards and they worked in eight-hour shifts.

For a couple of days, I didn't see the colonel and I thought it was funny how he couldn't rest until he'd found the skunk and then paid no attention to it.

I DID a lot of thinking about what the colonel had said about the skunk not being a skunk at all, but something that only looked like a skunk and how it might know more, some ways, than we did. And the more I lived with it, the more I began to believe that he might be right. Although it still seemed impossible that any critter without hands could know much about machinery in the first place, let alone do anything about it.

Then I got to remembering how me and Betsy had understood each other and I carried that a little further, imagining

how a man and machine might get to know one another so well, they could even talk together and how the man, even if he didn't have hands, might help the machine to improve itself. And while it sounds somewhat far-fetched just telling it, thinking of it in the secrecy of one's mind made it sound all right and it gave a sort of warm feeling to imagine that one could get to be downright personal friendly with machines.

When you come to think of it, it's not so far-fetched, either.

Perhaps, I told myself, when I had gone into the tavern and had left the skunk bedded down in Betsy, the skunk might have looked her over and felt sorry for such a heap of junk, like you or I would feel sorry for a homeless cat or an injured dog. And maybe the skunk had set out, right then and there, to fix her up as best he could, probably cannibalizing some metal here and there, from places where it would not be missed, to grow the computer and the other extra pieces on her.

Probably he couldn't understand, for the life of him, why they'd been left off to start with. Maybe, to him, a machine was no machine at all without those pieces on it. More than likely, he thought Betsy was just a botched-up job.

The guards began calling the skunk Stinky and that was a libel

because he never stunk a bit, but was one of the best-mannered, even-tempered animals that I have ever been acquainted with. I told them it wasn't right, but they just laughed at me, and before long the whole base knew about the name and everywhere we went they'd yell "Hi, Stinky" at us. He didn't seem to mind, so I began to think of him as Stinky, too.

I got it figured out to my own satisfaction that maybe Stinky could have fixed up Betsy and even why he fixed up Betsy. But the one thing I couldn't figure out was where he'd come from to start with. I thought on it a lot and came up with no answers except some foolish ones that were too much for even me to swallow.

I went over to see the colonel a couple of times, but the sergeants and the lieutenants threw me out before I could get to see him. So I got sore about it and decided not to go there any more until he sent for me.

ONE day, he did send for me and when I got there, the place was crowded with a lot of brass. The colonel was talking to an old gray-haired, eagle-beaked gent who had a fierce look about him and a rat-trap jaw and was wearing stars.

"General," said the colonel,

"may I introduce Stinky's special friend?"

The general shook hands with me. Stinky, who was riding on my shoulder, purred at him.

The general took a good look at Stinky.

"Colonel," he said, "I hope to God you're right. Because if you aren't and this business ever leaks, the Air Force goose is cooked. The Army and the Navy would never let us live it down and what Congress would do to us would be a crimson shame."

The colonel gulped a little. "Sir, I'm sure I'm right."

"I don't know why I let myself get talked into this," the general said. "It's the most hare-brained scheme I have ever heard of."

He had another squint at Stinky.

"He looks like a common skunk to me," the general said.

The colonel introduced me to a bunch of other colonels and a batch of majors, but he didn't bother with the captains if there were any there and I shook hands with them and Stinky purred at them and everything was cozy.

One of the colonels picked up Stinky, but he kicked up quite a fuss trying to get back to me.

The general said to me, "You seem to be the one he wants to be with."

"He's a friend of mine," I explained.

"I be damned," the general said.

After lunch, the colonel and the general came for me and Stinky and we went over to a hangar. The place had been cleared out and there was only one plane in it, one of the newer jets. There was a mob of people waiting for us, some of them military, but a lot of them were technicians in ordinary clothes or in dungarees. Some of them had clipboards tucked under their arms and some were carrying tools or what I imagined must be tools, although never before have I ever seen contraptions such as those. And there were different pieces of equipment scattered here and there.

"Now, Asa," the colonel said to me, "I want you to get into that jet with Stinky."

"And do what?" I asked.

"Just get in and sit. But don't touch anything. You might get the detail all fouled up."

It seemed a funny business and I hesitated.

"Don't be afraid," the general assured me. "There won't nothing happen. You just get in and sit."

So I did and it was a foolish business. I climbed up where the pilot sits and sat down in his seat and it was a crazy-looking place. There were instruments and gadgets and doodads all over. I was

almost afraid to move for fear of touching one of them because God knows what might have happened if I had.

I GOT in and sat and I kept myself interested for a time by just looking at all the stuff and trying to figure out what it was for, but I never rightly got much of it figured out.

But finally I had looked at everything a hundred times and puzzled over it and there wasn't anything more to do and I was awful bored. But I remembered all the money I was pulling down and the free drinking I was getting and I thought if a man just had to sit in a certain place to earn it, why, it was all right.

Stinky didn't pay any attention to any of the stuff. He settled down in my lap and went to sleep, or at least he seemed to go to sleep. He took it easy, for a fact. Once in a while, he opened an eye or twitched an ear, but that was all he did.

I hadn't thought much about it at first, but after I'd sat there for an hour or so, I began to get an idea of why they wanted me and Stinky in the plane. They figured, I told myself, that if they put Stinky in the ship, he might feel sorry for it, too, and do the same kind of job on it as he had done on Betsy. But if that was what they thought, they sure were get-

ting fooled, for Stinky didn't do a thing except curl up and go to sleep.

We sat there for several hours and finally they told us that we could get out.

And that is how Operation Stinky got off to a start. That is what they called all that foolishness. It does beat hell, the kind of names the Air Force can think up.

It went on like that for several days. Me and Stinky would go out in the morning and sit in a plane for several hours, then take a break for noon, then go back for a few hours more. Stinky didn't seem to mind. He'd just as soon be there as anywhere. All he'd do would be curl up in my lap and in five minutes he'd be dozing.

As the days went on, the general and the colonel and all the technicians who cluttered up the hangar got more and more excited. They didn't say a word, but you could see they were aching to bust out, only they held it back. And I couldn't understand that, for as far as I could see, there was nothing whatsoever happening.

Apparently their work didn't end when Stinky and I left. Evening after evening, lights burned in the hangar and a gang was working there and they had guards around three deep.

One day they pulled out the jet we had been sitting in and hauled in another and we sat in that and it was just the same as it had been before. Nothing really happened. And yet the air inside that hangar was so filled with tension and excitement, you could fairly light a fire with it.

It sure beat me what was going on.

Gradually the same sort of tension spread throughout the entire base and there were some funny goings-on. You never saw an outfit that was faster on its toes. A construction gang moved in and started to put up buildings and as soon as one of them was completed, machinery was installed. More and more people kept arriving until the base began to look like an anthill with a hot-foot.

ON ONE of the walks I took, with the guards trailing along beside me, I found out something else that made my eyes bug. They were installing a twelve-foot woven fence, topped with barbed wire, all around the area.

And inside the fence, there were so many guards, they almost walked on one another.

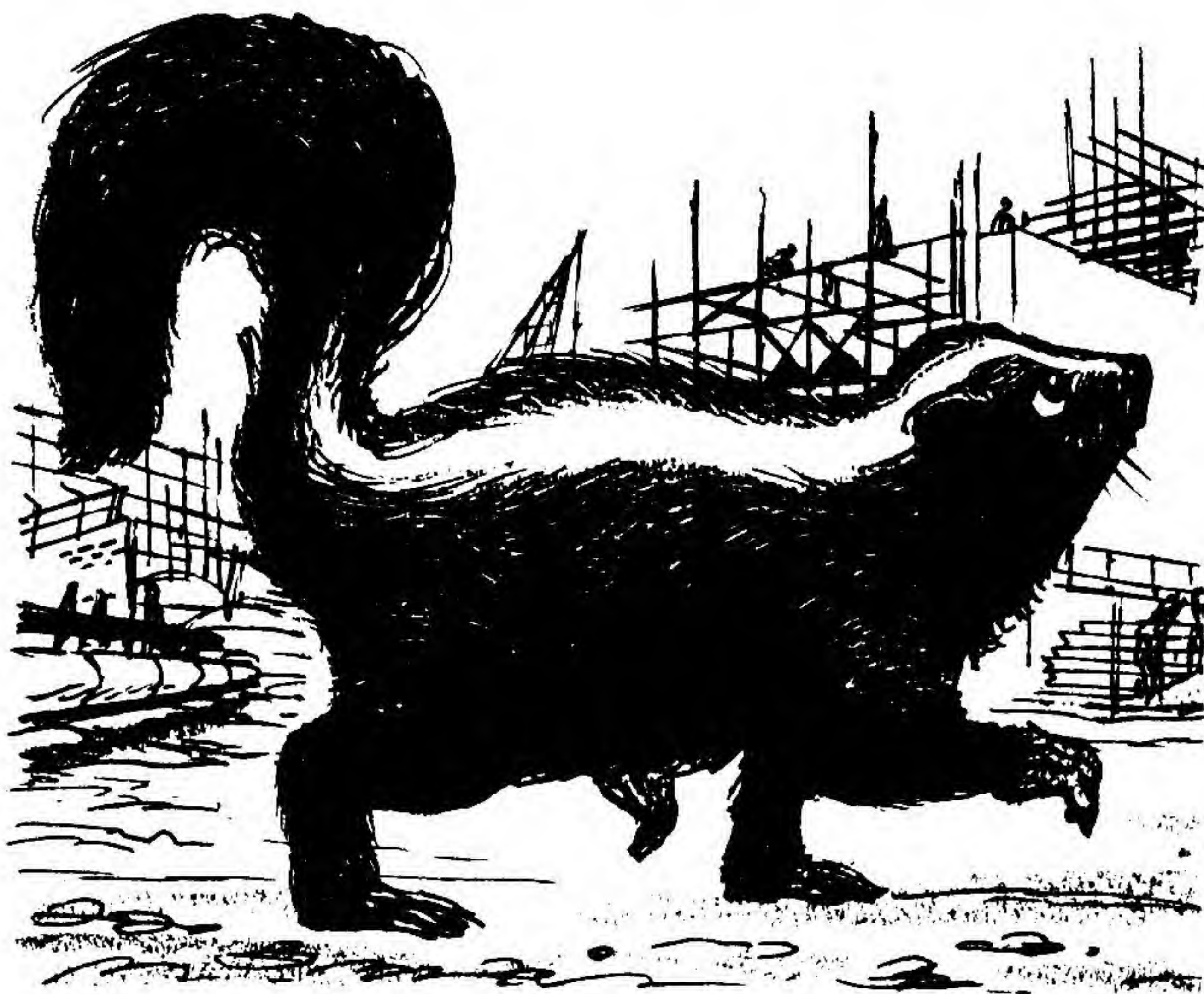
I was a little scared when I got back from the walk, because from what I saw, this thing I'd been pitchforked into was bigger and

more important than I had ever dreamed. Up until then, I'd figured it was just a matter of the colonel having his neck stuck out so far, he could never pull it back. All along, I had been feeling sorry for him because that general looked like the kind of gent who would stand for just so much tomfoolery before he lowered the boom.

It was about this time that they began to dig a big pit out in

the center of one of the runways. I went over one day to watch it and it didn't make no sense at all. Here they had a nice, smooth runway they'd spent a lot of money to construct and now they were digging it up to make what looked like a swimming pool. I asked around about it, but the people that I talked to either didn't know or they weren't talking.

Me and Stinky kept on sitting



in the planes. We were on our sixth one now. And there wasn't any change. I sat, bored stiff, while Stinky took it easy.

One evening the colonel sent a sergeant over to say he'd like to see me.

I went in and sat down and put Stinky on the desk. He lay down on top of it and looked from one to the other of us.

"Asa," said the colonel, "I think we got it made."



"You mean you been getting stuff?"

"We've got enough we actually understand to give us unquestioned air superiority. We're a good ten years, if not a hundred, depending on how much we can use, ahead of the rest of them. They'll never catch us now."

"But all Stinky did was sleep!"

"All he did," the colonel said, "was to redesign each ship. In some instances, there were principles involved that don't make a bit of sense, but I'll bet they will later. And in other cases, what he did was so simple and so basic that we're wondering why we never thought of it ourselves."

"Colonel, what is Stinky?"

"I don't know," he said.

"You got an idea, though."

"Sure, an idea. But that's all it is. It embarrasses me even to think of it."

"I don't embarrass easy."

"Okay, then — Stinky is like nothing on Earth. My guess is that he's from some other planet, maybe even some other solar system. I think he crossed space to us. How or why, I have no notion. His ship might have been wrecked and he got into a lifeboat and made it here."

"But if there was a lifeboat —"

"We've combed every foot of ground for miles around."

"And no lifeboat?"

"No lifeboat," said the colonel.

GETTING that idea down took a little doing, but I did it. Then I got to wondering about something else.

"Colonel," I said, "you claim Stinky fixed up the ships, made them even better. Now how could he have done that with no hands and just sleeping and never touching a thing?"

"You tell me," said the colonel. "I've heard a bunch of guesses. The only one that makes any kind of sense—and cockeyed sense at that—is telekinesis."

I sat there and admired that word. "What's it mean, Colonel?" I wanted to use it on the boys at the tavern, if I ever got back there, and I wanted to get it right.

"Moving things by the power of thought," he said.

"But there wasn't nothing moved," I objected. "All the improvements in Betsy and the planes came from right inside them, not stuff moved in."

"That could be done by telekinesis, too."

I shook my head, thoughtful-like. "Ain't the way I see it."

"Go ahead," he sighed. "Let's hear your theory. No reason you should be an exception."

"I think Stinky's got a kind of mental green thumb for machines," I said. "Like some people got green thumbs for plants, only he's got—"

The colonel took a long, hard frown at me. Then he nodded very slowly. "I see what you mean. Those new parts weren't moved in or around. They were *grown*."

"Something like that. Maybe he can make a machine come kind of alive and improve itself, grow parts that'll make it a better and happier and more efficient machine."

"Sounds silly when you say it," the colonel said, "but it makes a lot more sense than any of the other ideas. Man's been working with machines—real machines, that is—only a century or two. Make that ten thousand or a million years and it might not seem so silly."

We sat in silence while the twilight crept into the room and I think the both of us must have been thinking the same thing. Thinking of the black night that lay out beyond Earth and of how Stinky must have crossed it. And wondering, too, about what kind of world he came from and why he might have left it and what happened to him out in the long dark that forced him to look for asylum on Earth.

Thinking, too, I guess, about the ironic circumstance that had cast him on a planet where his nearest counterpart was a little animal that no cared to have much to do with.

“WHAT I can’t understand,” the colonel said, “is why he does it. Why does he do it for us?”

“He doesn’t do it for us,” I answered. “He does it for the planes. He feels sorry for them.”

The door burst open and the general came tramping in. He was triumphant. Dusk had crept into the room and I don’t think he saw me.

“We got an okay!” he gloated. “The ship will be in tomorrow. The Pentagon agrees!”

“General,” said the colonel, “we’re pushing this too hard. It’s time for us to begin to lay some sort of grounds for basic understanding. We’ve grabbed what we can grab the quickest. We’ve exploited this little cuss right up to the hilt. We have a lot of data —”

“Not all we need!” the general bellowed. “What we have been doing has been just sort of practice. We have no data on the A-ship. That is where we need it.”

“What we need as well is an understanding of this creature. An understanding of how he does it. If we could talk to him —”

“Talk!” the general shouted.

“Yes, talk!” the colonel shouted back. “He keeps purring all the time. That may be his means of communication. The men who found him simply whistled and he came. That was communication. If we had a little patience —”

“We have no time for patience, Colonel.”

“General, we can’t simply wring him dry. He’s done a lot for us. Let’s give the little guy a break. He’s the one who has had the patience — waiting for us to communicate with him, hoping that someday we’ll recognize him for what he is!”

They were yelling at one another and the colonel must have forgotten I was there. It was embarrassing. I held out my arms to Stinky and he jumped into them. I tiptoed across the room and went out as quietly as I could.

That night, I lay in bed with Stinky curled up on the covers at my feet. The four guards sat in the room, quiet as watchful mice.

I thought about what the colonel had said to the general and my heart went out to Stinky. I thought how awful it would be if a man suddenly was dumped into a world of skunks who didn’t care a rap about him except that he could dig the deepest and slickest burrows that skunks had ever seen and that he could dig them quick. And there were so many burrows to be dug that not one of the skunks would take the time to understand this man, to try to talk with him or to help him out.

I lay there feeling sorry and wishing there was something I could do. Then Stinky came walking up the covers and

crawled in under them with me and I put out my hand and held him tight against me while he purred softly at me. And that is how we went to sleep.

THE next afternoon, the A-ship arrived. The last of three that had been built, it was still experimental. It was a monster and we stood far back behind a line of guards and watched it come mushing down, settling base-first into the water-filled rocket pit they'd dug out on the runway. Finally it was down and it stood there, a bleak, squat thing that somehow touched one with awe just to look at it.

The crew came down the ladder and the launch went out to get them. They were a bunch of cocky youngsters and you could sense the pride in them.

Next morning, we went out to the ship. I rode in the launch with the general and the colonel, and while the boat bobbed against the ladder, they had another difference of opinion.

"I still think it's too risky, General," said the colonel. "It's all right to fool around with jets, but an atomic ship is a different matter. If Stinky goes fooling with that pile —"

The general said, tight-lipped: "We have to take the chance."

The colonel shrugged and went up the ladder. The general mo-

tioned to me and I went up with Stinky perched on my shoulder. The general followed.

Whereas Stinky and I before this had been in a ship alone, this time a picked crew of technicians came aboard as well. There was plenty of room and it was the only way they could study what Stinky might be doing. And I imagined that, with an A-ship, they'd want to keep close check.

I sat down in the pilot's chair and Stinky settled himself in my lap. The colonel stayed with us for a while, but after a time he left and we were alone.

I was nervous. What the colonel had said made good sense to me. But the day wore on and nothing happened and I began to feel that perhaps the colonel had been wrong.

It went on for four days like that and I settled into routine. I wasn't nervous any longer. We could depend on Stinky, I told myself. He wouldn't do anything to harm us.

By the way the technicians were behaving and the grin the general wore, I knew that Stinky must be performing up to expectations.

On the fifth day, as we were going out, the colonel said: "This should wind it up."

I was glad to hear it.

We were almost ready to knock off for noon when it hap-



pened. I can't tell you exactly how it was, for it was a bit confusing. It was almost as if someone had shouted, although no one had. I half rose out of the chair, then sat back again. And someone shouted once more.

I KNEW that something was about to happen. I could feel it in my bones. I knew I had to get out of the A-ship and get out fast. It was fear—unreasoning fear. And over and above the fear, I knew I could not leave. It was my job to stay. I had to stick it out. I grabbed the chair arms and hung on and tried my best to stay.

Then the panic hit me and there was nothing I could do. There was no way to fight it. I leaped out of the chair, dumping Stinky from my lap. I reached the door and fought it open, then turned back.

"Stinky!" I shouted.

I started across the room to reach him, but halfway across, the panic hit me again and I turned and bolted in blind flight.

I went clattering down the catwalk and from below me came the sound of running and the yells of frightened men. I knew then that I had been right, that I had not been cowardly altogether—there was something wrong.

Men were pouring out of the port of the big A-ship when I got

there and scrambling down the ladder. The launch was coming out to pick them up. One man fell off the ladder into the water and began to swim.

Out on the field, ambulances and fire rigs were racing toward the water pit and the siren atop the operations building was wailing like a stepped-on tomcat.

I looked at the faces around me. They were set and white and I knew that all the men were just as scared as I was and somehow, instead of getting scareder, I got a lot of comfort from it.

They went on tumbling down the ladder and more men fell in the drink, and I have no doubt at all that if someone had held a stopwatch on them, there'd have been swimming records falling.

I got in line to wait my turn and I thought again of Stinky and stepped out of line and started back to save him. But halfway up the catwalk, my courage ran plumb out and I was too scared to go on. The funny thing about it was that I didn't have the least idea what there was to scare me.

I went down the ladder among the last of them and piled into the launch, which was loaded so heavily that it barely crept back to solid ground.

The medical officer was running around and shouting to get the swimmers into decontamina-

tion and men were running everywhere and shouting and the fire rigs stood there racing their motors while the siren went on shrieking.

"Get back!" someone was shouting. "Run! Everybody back!"

So, of course, we ran like a flock of spooked sheep.

Then a wordless yell went up and we turned around.

The atomic ship was rising slowly from the pit. Beneath it, the water seethed and boiled. The ship rose steadily, gracefully, without a single shudder or shake. It went straight up into the sky, up and out of sight.

SUDDENLY I realized that I was standing in dead silence. No one was stirring. No one was making any noise. Everybody just stood and stared into the sky. The siren had shut off.

I felt someone tap me on the shoulder. It was the general.

"Stinky?" he asked.

"He wouldn't come," I answered, feeling low. "I was too scared to go and get him."

The general wheeled and headed off across the field. For no reason I can think of, I turned and followed him. He broke into a run and I loped along beside him.

We stormed into operations and went piling up the stairs to the tracking room.

The general bellowed: "You got a fix on it?"

"Yes, sir, we're tracking it right now."

"Good," the general said, breathing heavily. "Fine. We'll have to run it down. Tell me where it's headed."

"Straight out, sir. It still is heading out."

"How far?"

"About five thousand miles, sir."

"But it can't do that!" the general roared. "It can't navigate in space!"

He turned around and bumped into me.

"Get out of my way!" He went thumping down the stairs.

I followed him down, but outside the building I went another way. I passed administration and there was the colonel standing outside. I wasn't going to stop, but he called to me. I went over.

"He made it," said the colonel.

"I tried to take him off," I said, "but he wouldn't come."

"Of course not. What do you think it was that drove us from the ship?"

I thought back and there was only one answer. "Stinky?"

"Sure. It wasn't only machines, Asa, though he did wait till he got hold of something like the A-ship that he could make go out into space. But he had to get us off it first, so he threw us off."

I did some thinking about that, too. "Then he was kind of like a skunk."

"How do you mean?" asked the colonel, squinting at me.

"I never did get used to calling him Stinky. Never seemed right somehow, him not having a smell and still having that name. But he did have a smell—a mental one, I guess you'd say—enough to drive us right out of the ship."

The colonel nodded. "All the same, I'm glad he made it." He stared up at the sky.

"So am I," I said.

Although I was a little sore at Stinky as well. He could have said good-bye at least to me. I was the best friend he had on Earth and driving me out along with the other men seemed plain rude.

But now I'm not so sure.

I still don't know which end of a wrench to take hold of, but I have a new car now—bought it with the money I earned at the air base—and it can run all by itself. On quiet country roads, that is. It gets jittery in traffic. It's not half as good as Betsy.

I could fix that, all right. I found out when the car rose right over a fallen tree in the road. With what rubbed off on me from being with Stinky all that time, I could make it fly. But I won't. I ain't aiming to get treated the way Stinky was.

—CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

Man in the Jar

By DAMON KNIGHT

*Vane did not indiscriminately
bottle live people — — he had to
have a sound business reason!*

THE hotel room on the planet Meng was small and crowded. Blue-tinged sunlight from the window fell on a soiled gray carpet, a massive sandbox dotted with cigarette butts, a clutter of bottles. One corner of the room was piled high with baggage and curios. The occupant, a Mr. R. C. Vane of Earth, was sitting near the door: a man about **fifty**, clean-shaven, with bristling iron-gray hair. He was soberly, murderously drunk.

There was a tap on the door and the bellhop slipped in — a na-

tive, tall and brown, with greenish black hair cut too long in the back. He looked about nineteen. He had one green eye and one blue.

"Set it there," said Vane.

The bellhop put his tray down. "Yes, sir." He took the unopened bottle of Ten Star off the tray, and the ice bucket, and the seltzer bottle, crowding them in carefully among the things already on the table. Then he put the empty bottles and the ice bucket back on the tray. His hands were big and knob-jointed;

Illustrated by ASHMAN

he seemed too long and wide-shouldered for his tight green uniform.

"So this is Meng City," said Vane, watching the bellhop.

VANE was sitting erect and unruffled in his chair, with his striped moth-wing jacket on and his string tie tied. He might have been sober, except for the deliberate way he spoke and the redness of his eyes.

"Yes, sir," said the bellhop, straightening up with the tray in his hands. "This your first time here, sir?"

"I came through two weeks ago," Vane told him. "I did not like it then and I do not like it now. Also, I do not like this room."

"Management is sorry if you don't like the room, sir. Very good view from this room."

"It's dirty and small," said Vane, "but it doesn't matter. I'm checking out this afternoon. Leaving on the afternoon rocket. I wasted two weeks upcountry, investigating Marack stories. Nothing to it — just native talk. Miserable little planet." He sniffed, eyeing the bellhop. "What's your name, boy?"

"Jimmy Rocksha, sir."

"Well, Jimmy Rocks, look at that pile of stuff." Tourist goods, scarves and tapestries, rugs, blankets and other things were heaped

over the piled suitcases. It looked like an explosion in a curio shop. "There's about forty pounds of it I have no room for, not counting that knocked-down jar. Any suggestions?"

The bellhop thought about it slowly. "Sir, if I might suggest, you could put the scarves and things inside the jar. I think they'll fit."

Vane said grudgingly, "That might work. You know how to put those jars together?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Well, let's see you try. Go on, don't stand there." Vane swirled his warm, flat drink.

The bellhop set his tray down again and crossed the room. A big bundle of gray pottery pieces, tied together with twine, had been stowed on top of Vane's wardrobe trunk, a little above the bellhop's head. Roksha carefully removed his shoes and climbed on a chair. His brown feet were bare and clean. He lifted the bundle without effort, got down, set the bundle on the floor and put his shoes back on.

Vane took a long swallow of his lukewarm highball, finishing it. He closed his eyes while he drank and nodded over the glass for a moment afterward, as if listening to something whispering inside him.

"All right," he said, getting up, "let us see."

THE bellhop loosened the twine. There were six long, thick, curving pieces, shaped a little like giant shoehorns. Then there were two round ones. One was bigger; that was the bottom. The other had a handle; that was the lid. The bellhop began to separate the pieces carefully, laying them out on the carpet.

"Watch out how you touch those together," Vane grunted, coming up behind him. "I wouldn't know how to get them apart again."

"Yes, sir."

"That's an antique I got up-country. They used to be used for storing grain and oil. The natives claim the Maracks had the secret of making them stick the way they do. Ever heard that?"

"Up-country boys tell a lot of fine stories, sir," said the bellhop. He had the six long pieces arranged, well separated, in a kind of petal pattern around the big flat piece. They took up most of the free space; the jar would be chest-high if it could be assembled.

Standing up, the bellhop took two of the long curved pieces and carefully brought the edges closer together. They seemed to jump the last fraction of an inch, like magnets, and merged into one smooth piece. Peering, Vane could barely make out the join.

In the same way, the bellhop

added another piece to the first two. Now he had half the jar assembled. Carefully, he lowered this half jar toward the edge of the big flat piece. The pieces clicked together. The bellhop stooped for another side piece.

"Hold on a minute," said Vane suddenly. "Got an idea. Instead of putting that thing all together, then trying to stuff things into it, load the things in, *then* put the rest of the side on."

"Yes, sir." The bellhop laid the piece of crockery down again and picked up some light blankets, which he dropped on the bottom of the jar.

"Not that way, dummy," said Vane impatiently. "Get *in* there — pack them down tight."

The bellhop hesitated. "Yes, sir." He stepped delicately over the remaining unassembled pieces and knelt on the bottom of the jar, rolling the blankets and pressing them snugly in.

Behind him, Vane moved on tiptoe, putting two long pieces silently together — *tic!* — then a third — *tic!* — and then as he lifted them, *tic, clack!* the sides melted into the bottom and the top. The jar was complete.

The bellhop was inside.

VANE breathed hard through flared nostrils. He took a cigar out of a green-lizard pocket case, cut it with a lapel knife and lit

it. Exhaling smoke, he leaned over and looked down into the jar.

Except for a moan of surprise when the jar closed, the bellhop had not made a sound. Looking down, Vane saw his brown face looking up.

"Let me out of this jar, please, sir," said the bellhop.

"Can't do that," Vane said. "They didn't tell me how, upcountry."

The bellhop moistened his lips. "Upcountry, they use a kind of tree grease. It creeps between the pieces and they fall apart."

"They didn't give me anything like that," said Vane indifferently.

"Then please, sir, you break this jar and let me come out."

Vane picked a bit of tobacco off his tongue. He looked at it curiously and then flicked it away. "I spotted you in the lobby the minute I came in this morning. Tall and thin. Too strong for a native. One green eye, one blue. Two weeks I spent upcountry, looking—and there you were in the lobby."

"Sir?"

"You're a Marack," said Vane flatly.

The bellhop did not answer for a moment. "But, sir," he said incredulously, "Maracks are legends, sir. Nobody believes that any more. There are no Maracks."

"You lifted that jar down like

nothing," said Vane, "though it took two boys to put it up there. You've got the hollow temples. You've got the long jaw and the hunched shoulders." Frowning, he took a billfold out of his pocket and took out a yellowed card. He showed it to the bellhop. "Look at that picture. I hope," he added, "it won't upset you. Might be a relative of yours."

It was a faded photograph of a skeleton in a glass case. There was something disturbing about the skeleton. It was too long and thin; the shoulders seemed hunched and the skull was narrow and hollow-templed. Under it the printing said, "ABORIGINE OF NEW CLEVELAND, MENG (SIGMA LYRA II)" and in smaller letters, "Newbold Anthropological Museum, Ten Eyck, Queensland, N. T. Courtesy of Estate of Walter B. Soong."

"Found it between the pages of a book two hundred years old," said Vane, carefully putting it back. "It was mailed as a postcard to an ancestor of mine. A year later, I happened to be on Nova Terra. Now get this—the museum is still there, but that skeleton is not! They deny it ever was there. Curator seemed to think it was a fake. None of the native races on Meng have skeletons like that, he said."

"Must be a fake, sir," the bellhop agreed.



"I WILL tell you what I did next," Vane went on. "I read all the contemporary accounts I could find of frontier days on this planet. A couple of centuries ago, nobody on Meng thought the Maracks were legends. They looked enough like the natives to pass, but they had certain special powers. They could turn one thing into another. They could influence your mind, if you weren't on your guard against them. I next read all the export records back to a couple of centuries ago. Also the geological charts in Planetary Survey. I discovered something. It just happens that there is no source of natural diamonds anywhere on Meng."

"No, sir?" asked the bellhop nervously.

"Not one. No diamonds and no place where they ever could have been mined. But until two hundred years ago, Meng exported one billion stellors' worth of flawless diamonds every year. I ask, where did they come from? And why did they stop?"

"I don't know, sir."

"The Maracks made them," Vane said bluntly. "For a trader named Soong and his family. They died. After that, no more diamonds from Meng."

He opened a suitcase, rummaged inside it a moment and took out two objects. One was a narrow oval bundle of something

wrapped in stiff yellow plant fibers; the other was a shiny gray-black lump half the size of his fist.

"Do you know what this is?" Vane asked, holding up the oval bundle.

"No, sir."

"Air weed, they call it upcountry. One of the old men had this one buried under his hut, along with the jar. *And this.*" He held up the black lump. "Nothing special about it, would you say? Just a piece of graphite, probably from the old mine at Badlong. But graphite is pure carbon. And so is a diamond."

He put both objects carefully down on the nearby table and wiped his hands. The graphite had left black smudges on them.

"Think about it," he said. "You've got exactly one hour, till three o'clock." Delicately, he tapped his cigar over the mouth of the jar. A few flakes of powdery ash floated down on the bellhop's upturned face.

Vane went back to his chair. He moved deliberately and a little stiffly, but did not stagger. He peeled the foil off the bottle of Ten Star. He poured himself a substantial drink, added ice, splashed a little seltzer in. He took a long, slow swallow.

"Sir," said the bellhop finally, "you know I can't make any diamonds out of black rock. What's going to happen when it comes

three o'clock and that rock is still just a piece of rock?"

"I think," Vane answered, "I will just take the wrappings off that air weed and drop it in the jar with you. Air weed, I am told, will expand to hundreds of times its volume in air. When it fills the jar to the brim, I will put the lid on. And when we're crossing that causeway to the spaceport, I think you may get tipped off the packrat into the bay. The bottom is deep silt, they tell me."

He took another long, unhurried swallow.

"Think about it," he said, staring at the jar with red eyes.

WITHIN the jar, it was cool and dim. The bellhop had enough room to sit fairly comfortably with his legs crossed, or else he could kneel, but then his face came right up to the mouth of the jar. The opening was too small for his head. He could not straighten up any farther or put his legs out. The bellhop was afraid and was sweating in his tight uniform. He was only nineteen and nothing like this had ever happened to him before.

The clink of ice came from across the room. The bellhop said, "Sir?"

The chair springs whined and, after a moment, the Earthman's face appeared over the mouth of the jar. His chin was dimpled.

There were gray hairs in his nostrils and a few gray and black bristles in the creases of loose skin around his jaw. His red eyes were hooded and small. He looked down into the bellhop's face without speaking.

"Sir," the bellhop said earnestly, "do you know how much they pay me here at this hotel?"

"No."

"Twelve stellors a week, sir, and my meals. If I could make diamonds, sir, why would I be working here?"

Vane's expression did not change. "Ask me a hard one. Soong had to sweat you Maracks to get a billion stellors a year. There used to be thousands of you on this continent alone, but now there are so few that you can disappear among the natives. The diamonds took too much out of you. You're close to extinction now. And you're all scared. You've gone underground. You've still got your powers, but you don't dare use them — unless there's no other way to keep your secret. You were lords of this planet once, but you'd rather stay alive. Of course, all this is merely guesswork."

"Yes, sir," said the bellhop despairingly.

The house phone rang. Vane crossed the room and thumbed the key down, watching the bellhop from the corner of his eye.

"What is it?" he said, flat-voiced.

"Mr. Vane," said the voice of the desk clerk, "if I may ask, did the refreshments you ordered arrive?"

"The bottle came," Vane answered. "Why?"

The bellhop was listening, balling his fists on his knees. Sweat stood out on his brown forehead.

"Oh, nothing really, Mr. Vane, only the boy did not come back. He is usually very reliable, Mr. Vane. But excuse me for troubling you."

"No trouble," said Vane stonily, and turned the phone off.

He came back to the jar. He swayed a little, rocking back and forth from heels to toes. In one hand he had the highball glass; with the other he was playing with the little osmiridium knife that hung by an expanding chain from his lapel.

After a while, he said, "Why didn't you call for help?"

THE bellhop did not answer. Vane went on softly, "Those hotel phones will pick up a voice across the room. I know that. So why were you quiet?"

The bellhop said unhappily, "If I did yell, sir, they would find me in this jar."

"What of it?"

The bellhop grimaced. "There's some other people that still believe in Maracks, sir. I have to be

careful about my eyes. They would know there could only be the one reason why you would treat me like this."

Vane studied him for a moment. "And you'd take a chance on the air weed, and the bay, just to keep anyone from finding out?"

"It's a long time since we had any Marack hunts on this planet, sir."

Vane snorted softly. He glanced up at the wall clock. "Forty minutes," he said, and went back to his chair by the door.

The room was silent except for the faint whir of the clock. After a while, Vane moved to the writing desk. He put a printed customs declaration form in the machine and began tapping keys slowly, muttering over the complicated Interstellar symbols.

"Sir," said the bellhop quietly, "you know you can't kill a biped person and just get away. This is not like the bad old times."

Vane grunted, tapping keys. "Think not?" He took a sip from his highball and set it down again.

"Even if they find out you have mistreated the headman upcountry, sir, they will be very severe."

"They won't find out," Vane said. "Not from him."

"Sir, even if I could make you your diamond, it would only be worth of few thousand stellors. That is nothing to a man like you."

Vane paused and half turned. "Flawless, that weight, it would be worth a hundred thousand. But I'm not going to sell it." He turned back to the machine, finished a line and started to tap out another.

"No, sir?"

"No. I'm going to keep it." Vane's eyes half closed; his fingers poised motionless on the keys. He seemed to come to himself with a start, hit another key and rolled the paper out of the machine. He picked up an envelope and rose, looking over the paper in his hand.

"Just to keep it, sir, and look at it now and then?" the bellhop asked softly. Sweat was running down into his eyes, but he kept his fists motionless on his knees.

"That's it," said Vane, with the same faraway look.

He folded the paper slowly and put it into the envelope as he walked toward the message chute near the door. At the last moment, he checked himself, snapped the paper open again and stared at it. A slow flush came to his cheeks.

Crumpling the paper slowly in his hands, he said, "That almost worked."

HE TORE the paper across deliberately, and then again, and again, before he threw the pieces away.

"Just one symbol in the wrong

box," he said, "but it was the right wrong symbol. I'll tell you where you made your mistake, though, boy." He came closer.

"I don't understand," said the bellhop.

"You thought if you could get me to thinking about that diamond, my mind would wander. It did—but I knew what was happening. Here's where you made your mistake: *I don't give a damn about that diamond.*"

"Sir?" asked the bellhop in bewilderment.

"A steller to you is a new pair of pants. A steller to me, or a thousand stellers, is just raw material for business deals. That's what counts. I'd offer you money, but you explained yourself why you can't be bought—you could make diamonds and be rich, but you don't dare. That's why I have to use this method."

"Sir, I don't know what you mean."

"You know, all right. You're getting a little dangerous now, aren't you? You're cornered and the time's running out. So you took a little risk." He stooped, picked up one of the scraps of paper, unfolded it and smoothed it out. "Right here, in the box where the loyalty oath to the Archon is supposed to go, I wrote the symbol for 'pig.' If I sent that down, the thought police would be up here in fifteen minutes."

He balled up the paper again, into an even smaller wad, and dropped it on the carpet.

"Think you can make me forget to pick that up again and burn it, before I leave?" he asked amiably. "Try."

The bellhop swallowed hard. "Sir, you did that *yourself*. You made a slip of the finger."

Vane smiled at him for the first time and walked away.

The bellhop put his back against the wall of the jar and pushed with all his strength against the opposite side. He pushed until the muscles of his back stood out in knotted ropes. The pottery walls were as solid as rock.

He was sweating more than ever. He relaxed, breathing hard; he rested his head on his knees and tried to think. The bellhop had heard of ruthless Earthmen, but he had never seen one.

He straightened up. "Sir, are you still there?"

The chair creaked and Vane came over, glass in hand.

"Sir," said the bellhop earnestly, "if I can prove to you that I'm really not a Marack, will you let me go? I mean you'll have to let me go then, won't you?"

"Why, certainly," Vane said agreeably. "Go ahead and prove it."

"Well, sir, haven't you heard other things about the Maracks —

some other manner of test?"

Vane looked thoughtful; he put his chin down on his chest and his eyes filmed over.

"About what they can or can't do?" the bellhop suggested. "If I tell you, sir, you might think I made it up."

"Wait a minute."

VANE was swaying slightly, back and forth, his eyes half closed. His string tie was still perfectly tied, his striped moth-wing jacket immaculate. He said, "I remember something. The Marack hunters used this a good deal, I understand. Maracks can't stand liquor. It poisons them."

"You're positive about that, sir?" the bellhop said eagerly.

"Of course I'm positive."

"All right then, sir!"

Vane nodded and went to the table to get the bottle of Ten Star. It was still two-thirds full. He came back with it and said, "Open your mouth."

The bellhop opened his mouth wide and shut his eyes. The liquor hit his teeth and the back of his mouth in one solid splash; it poured down both cheeks and some of it ran up his nose. He choked and strangled. The liquor burned all the way down his throat and windpipe; tears blinded him; he couldn't breathe.

When the paroxysm was over, he gasped, "Sir — sir, that wasn't a

fair test. You shouldn't have poured it on me like that. Give me a little bit, in a glass."

"Now I want to be fair. We'll try it again." Vane found an empty glass, poured two fingers of brandy into it and came back. "Easy does it," he said, and trickled a little into the bellhop's mouth.

The bellhop swallowed, his head swimming in brandy fumes.

"Once more," said Vane, and poured again.

The bellhop swallowed. The liquor was gathering in a ball of heat inside him.

"Again."

He swallowed.

Vane stood back. The bellhop opened his eyes and looked blissfully up at him. "You see, sir? No poison. I drank it and I'm not dead!"

"Hmm," said Vane with an interested expression. "Well, imagine that. Maracks can drink liquor."

The bellhop's victorious smile slowly faded. "Sir, please don't joke with me."

"If you think it's a joke—"

"Sir, you *promised*."

"I said yes — if you could prove to me that you are not a Marack. Go ahead, prove it. Here's another little test for you, incidentally. An anatomist I know looked at that skeleton and told me it was so constricted at the shoulders that

a Marack can't lift his hand higher than his head. All right, begin by telling me why you stood on a chair to get my bundle down—or better yet, just put your arm out the neck of that jar."

There was a silence. Vane took another cigar out of the green-lizard case, cut it with the little osmiridium knife and lit it without taking his eyes off the bellhop.

"Now you're getting dangerous again," he said with enjoyment. "You're thinking it over. This begins to get interesting. You're wondering how you can kill me from inside that jar, without using your Marack powers. Go on, think about it."

He breathed smoke, leaning toward the jar. "You've got fifteen minutes."

WORKING without haste, Vane rolled up all the blankets and other souvenirs and strapped them into bundles. He removed some toilet articles from the dresser and packed them away in his grip. He took a last look around the room, saw the paper scraps on the floor and picked up the tiny pellet he had made of one of them. He showed it to the bellhop with a grin, then dropped it into the ash-receiver and burned it. He sat down comfortably in the chair near the door.

"Five minutes," he said.

"Four minutes," he said.

"Three minutes."

"Two minutes."

"All right," said the bellhop.

"Yes?" Vane got up and stood over the jar.

"I'll do it — I'll make the diamond."

"Ahh?" said Vane, half questioningly. He picked up the lump of graphite and held it out.

"I don't need to touch it," the bellhop said listlessly. "Just put it down on the table. It will take about a minute."

"Umm," said Vane, watching him keenly. The bellhop was crouched in the jar, eyes closed; all Vane could see of him was the glossy green-black top of his head.

"If you just hadn't had that air weed," the bellhop said sullenly, his voice muffled.

Vane laughed. "I didn't need the air weed. I could have taken care of you in a dozen ways. This knife —" he held it up — "has a molecular-vibration blade. Turn it on, it'll cut through anything, like cheese. I could have minced you up and floated you down the drain."

The bellhop's face turned up, pale and wide-eyed.

"No time for that now, though," Vane said. "It would have to be the air weed."

"Is that how you're going to get me loose, afterward?" the bell-

hop asked. "Cut the jar with that knife?"

"Mm? Oh, certainly," said Vane, watching the graphite lump. Was there a change in its appearance or not?

"I'm disappointed, in a way," he said abstractedly. "I thought you'd give me a fight. You Maracks are overrated, I suppose."

"It's all done," said the bellhop. "Take it, please, and let me out."

Vane's eyes narrowed. "It doesn't look done, to me."

"It only looks black on the outside, sir. Just rub it off."

Vane did not move.

"Go ahead, sir," said the bellhop urgently. "Pick it up and see."

"You're a little too eager," Vane said.

He took a fountain pen out of his pocket and used it to prod the graphite gingerly. Nothing happened; the lump moved freely across the tabletop. Vane touched it briefly with one finger, then picked it up in his hand.

"No tricks?" he said quizzically.

He felt the lump, weighed it, put it down again. There were black graphite smears in his palm.

VANE opened his lapel knife and cut the graphite lump down the middle. It fell into two shiny black pieces.

"Graphite," said Vane, and with an angry gesture, he stuck the knife blade into the table.

He turned to the bellhop, dusting off his hands. "I don't get you," he said, prodding the oval bundle of the air weed experimentally. He picked it up. "All you did was stall. Disappointing."

The dry wrappings came apart in his hands. Between the fibers, a dirty-white bulge began to show.

Vane lifted the package to drop it into the jar and saw that the bellhop's scared face filled the opening. While he hesitated briefly, the gray-white floss of the air weed foamed slowly out over the back of his hand. Vane felt a constriction and instinctively tried to drop the bundle. He couldn't. The growing, billowing floss was sticky — it stuck to his hand, then his sleeve. It grew, slowly, but with a horrifying steadiness.

Gray-faced, Vane whipped his arm around, trying to shake off the weed. Like thick lather, the floss splattered downward but did not separate. A glob of it hit his trouser leg and clung. Another, swelling, dripped down to the carpet. His whole right arm and side were covered deep under a mound of white. The floss had now stopped growing and seemed to be stiffening.

The bellhop began to rock himself back and forth inside the jar. The jar tipped and fell back. The bellhop rocked harder. The jar was inching its way across the carpet.

After a few moments, the bellhop paused to put his face up and see which way he was going. Vane, held fast by the weed, was leaning toward the table, straining hard, reaching with his one free hand toward the knife he had put there. The carpet bulged after him, but too much furniture was holding it.

The bellhop lowered his head and rocked the jar again, harder. When he looked up, Vane's eyes were closed tight, his face red with effort. He was extended as far as he could reach across the table, but his fingers were still clawing air an inch short of the knife. The bellhop rocked hard. The jar inched forward, came to rest solidly against the table, pinning Vane's arm against it by the flaring sleeve.

The bellhop relaxed and looked up. Feeling himself caught, the Earthman had stopped struggling and was looking down. He tugged, but could not pull the sleeve free.

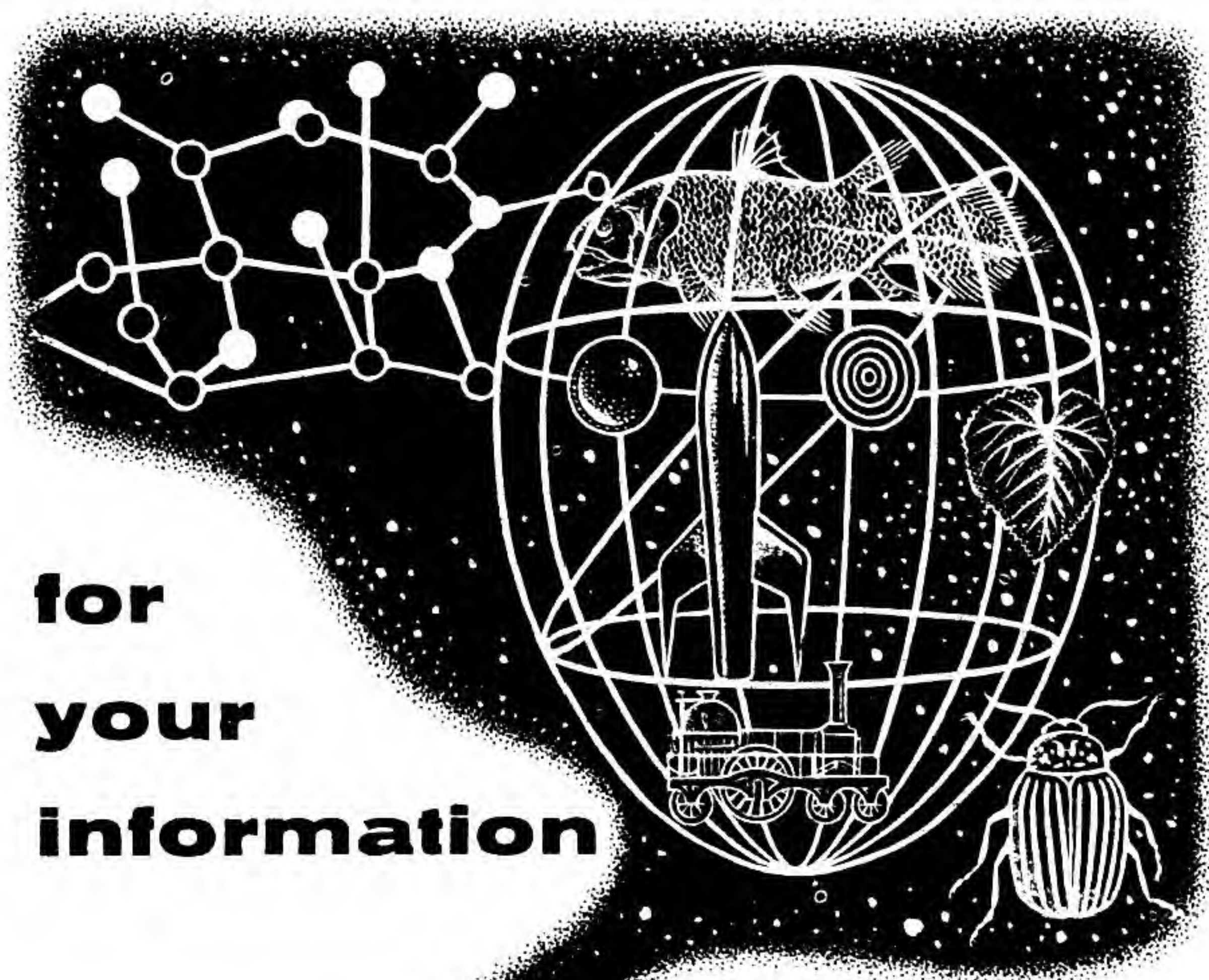
"Stalemate," said Vane heavily. He showed his teeth to the bellhop. "Close, but no prize. I can't get at you. You can't hurt me."

The bellhop's head bowed as if in assent. But then his long arm came snaking up out of the jar. His fingers closed around the deadly little knife.

"A Marack can lift his arm higher than his head," he said.

— DAMON KNIGHT

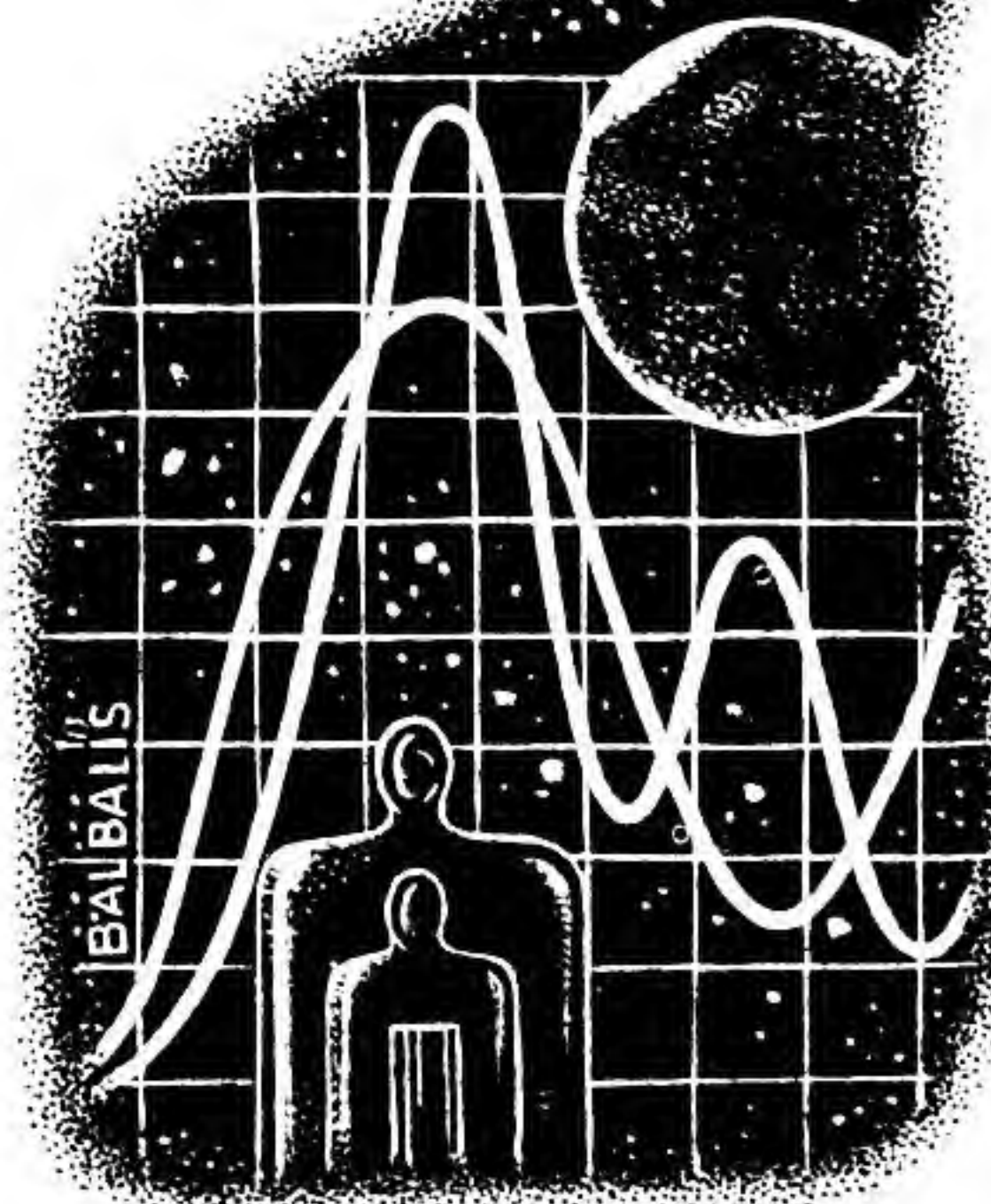
**for
your
information**



BY WILLY LEY

THE COMING OF THE ROBOTS

AT THE time when Rudolph II of Habsburg was Holy Roman Emperor, there lived in the city of Prague a rabbi who was so highly respected by everybody who knew him that posterity—and possibly even his contemporaries—referred to him as High Rabbi Loew. One day a messenger from the emperor arrived with the im-



perial request that Rabbi Judah Loew with companions of his choosing was to be at the Hradcany Castle on a specific date.

The day was the 23rd of February, 1592, and Rabbi Loew went to the castle. He took with him his brother, Rabbi Sinai, and his son-in-law, Isak Kohen. At the castle, Rabbi Loew was brought into a room where Prince Bertier was waiting for him. The other two men were signaled to sit in a corner, some distance away. But, as Kohen reported later, the prince spoke very loudly and Rabbi Loew, presumably suspecting that the prince was hard of hearing, answered in an equally loud voice. The two witnesses could understand every word, even though they were in a far corner.

All at once, the reason for the loud speaking became clear. One of the drapes parted and the emperor himself appeared and joined in the conversation.

These few facts and the date are all we know about the audience. Probably everybody present had to vow secrecy. There is nothing about the discussion in the court's records. Isak Kohen did not say a word beyond what has just been related. And the astronomer David Gans, a friend of Tycho Brahe, who had some dealings with Rabbi Loew, said that the rabbi himself also never

mentioned a word about the meeting.

My reason for telling all this is that High Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague is credited by legend with having made the first robot in history.

THE topic came up for discussion on a hot day in summer, 1956, when Fritz Lang was in New York and we were both sitting somewhat impatiently in his hotel room waiting for room service. The fact that we had to wait led to idle talk about liquor organs, the possibilities of mechanized room service. From there, it was only a short step to serving robots and Fritz Lang abruptly said: "Say, the golem must have been the first robot."

We tried to find an older one, but except for the magic head which Roger Bacon is supposed to have made and which burst into splinters after uttering one word or one sentence, we could not think of any.

That golem we discussed was supposed to have been a man made of clay and endowed with a kind of pseudo-life by Rabbi Loew. The golem was able to hear, but it could not speak. It was not very bright, but intensely loyal. It never needed sleep, although it feigned sleep quite often, and had enormous strength. Fire or water did not harm it.

But there was one problem: it had been created by magic, which in itself was a sin.

But the sin would be tolerated if it was only used for religious purposes. When somebody — the rabbi's wife was the first to make that mistake — issued an order for personal convenience or other secular matters, the golem would inevitably misperform. (The story of the endless water-carrying which we know as the basis of "sorcerer's apprentice" was told about the golem.)

Legend says that after the audience with Emperor Rudolph II, the rabbi declared, "We no longer need Jossele Golem," and that he and another son-in-law of his named Jakob Katz and his pupil Jakob Sosson took the golem to the attic of the Altneu Synagogue in Prague and recited the requisite spells to take its pseudo-life away from it.

In the legends that formed later — they have been collected several times — the audience with the emperor is taken to have ended the golem's career. But from the strictly historical standpoint, it seems that this audience was, so to speak, the birthday of the golem. The fact that a rabbi was called to the emperor was such an unusual event that it had to have some very special significance.

Well, every child in Prague

and also elsewhere where German was spoken — it is a somewhat strange fact that the legends hardly penetrated the language barrier; they remained restricted to Jewish and Christian German-speaking circles — had heard about the golem at one time, if only because there is a reference to it in classical German literature. But the story that the "corpse" of the golem stayed in the attic of the Altneu Synagogue seemed to have been restricted to Prague, as a local legend.

One who heard it, probably in early childhood, was a man named Egon Erwin Kisch, who became a famous journalist. But he never used the story journalistically as long as he stayed in Prague.

WHEN the First World War came, Kisch was drafted into the Austrian Army. He spent most of the year 1915 in the Carpathian Mountains. There he met a man who at first was as sullen as possible and did not wish to have any truck with soldiers, any kind of soldiers, no matter what their nationality, uniform or rank.

But when he heard, one day, that Kisch had been born in Prague and had lived there most of his life, he warmed up. Prague was the city he most wanted to go to. He wanted to see the grave of Rabbi Loew and worship in



Fig. 1: Paul Wegener as the Golem in a silent German picture of that title, made in the early 1920's

the Altneu Synagogue. It turned out that he collected everything about the golem that came his way and he finally showed Kisch a manuscript he had bought from a traveling peddler.

The manuscript alleged to tell what had happened to the golem after the rabbi had removed its pseudo-life. It told how the temple servant of the Pinkas Synagogue (also in Prague), Abraham ben Secharja by name, approached his opposite number in the Altneu Synagogue with the proposal to steal the dead golem. Abraham Chajim of the Altneu Synagogue was finally persuaded to cooperate, since Abraham Chajim learned that his son-in-law,

one Ascher Balbierer, knew formulas from the *Sohar* which would revive the golem.

They allegedly brought the golem's body to the basement of Balbierer's house, but whatever they tried, nothing helped—the golem remained dead.

Then an epidemic (diphtheria, in all likelihood, from the description) came and two of the five children of Ascher Balbierer died. Whereupon the mother of the two dead children put her foot down, blaming the presence of the golem for the bereavement, and forced her husband and his friends to dispose of the clay figure.

A soldier in the front lines has worries enough and Kisch temporarily forgot the whole story. But after the war, when he was back in Prague, he decided to satisfy his curiosity and sell a few articles in the process. He applied for permission to visit the attic of the Altneu Synagogue to look for the golem. Permission was refused. He pulled different strings. Permission was not refused this time; it was pointed out to him that there was no staircase from the interior of the synagogue to the attic.

Well, how could one get in? Only by climbing the building from the outside on an iron ladder which started some eight feet above the ground. But he couldn't

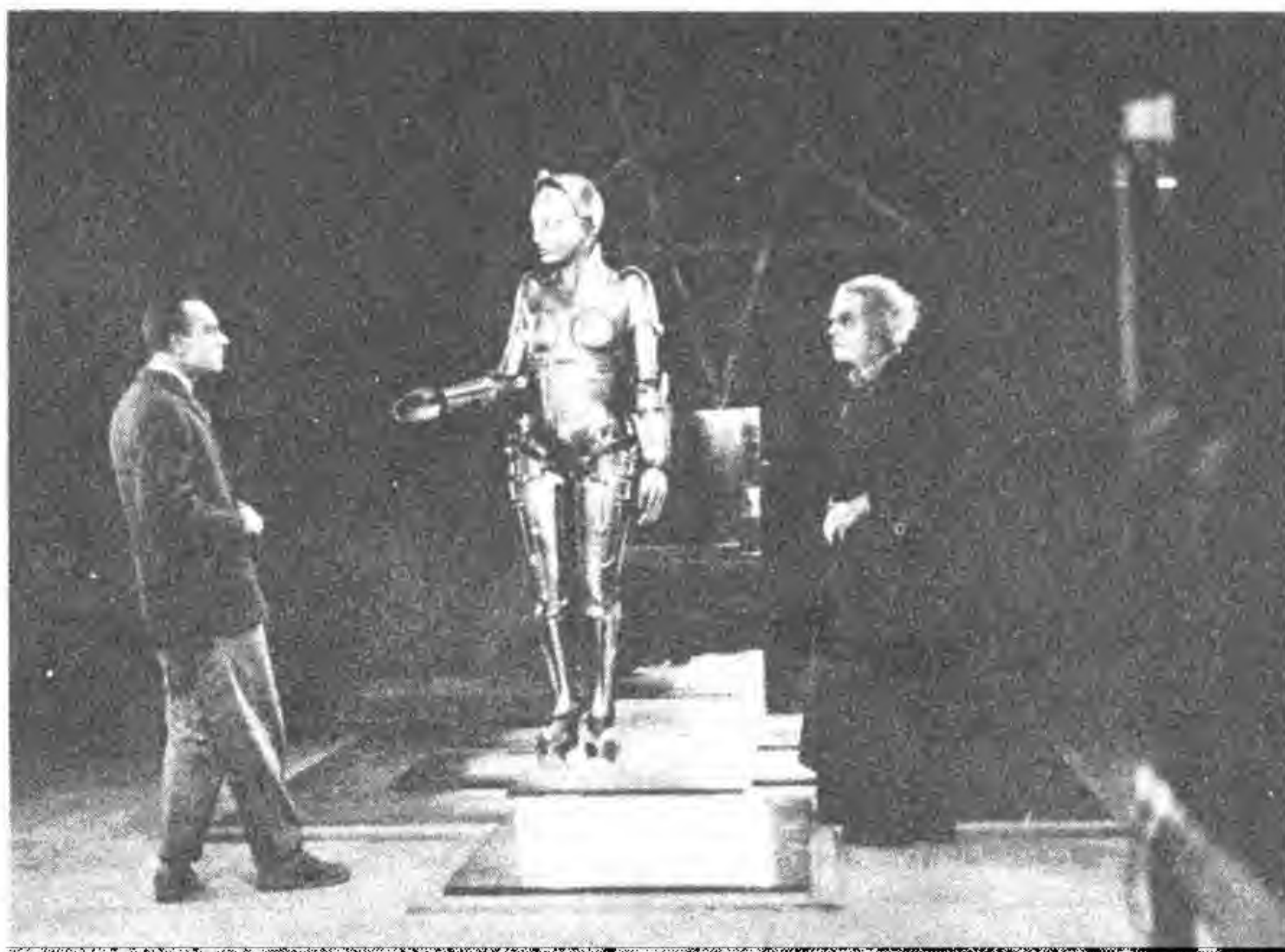


Fig. 2: Brigitte Helm as the robot in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*

(Courtesy: Fritz Lang)



Fig. 3: The robot Brigitte is thirsty between takes. (This picture has never been published before)

(Courtesy: Fritz Lang)

do that. Nobody was permitted to do it.

SOME more activity on the part of a journalist with a well-known name finally made the permission come through. On a bright day, and with more audience than Kisch wished for, he climbed the building and finally entered the attic. As he reported, the room was anything but gloomy and mysterious. Several large windows admitted much sunlight, and since the building was old and small, its attic was not even above the roofs of other

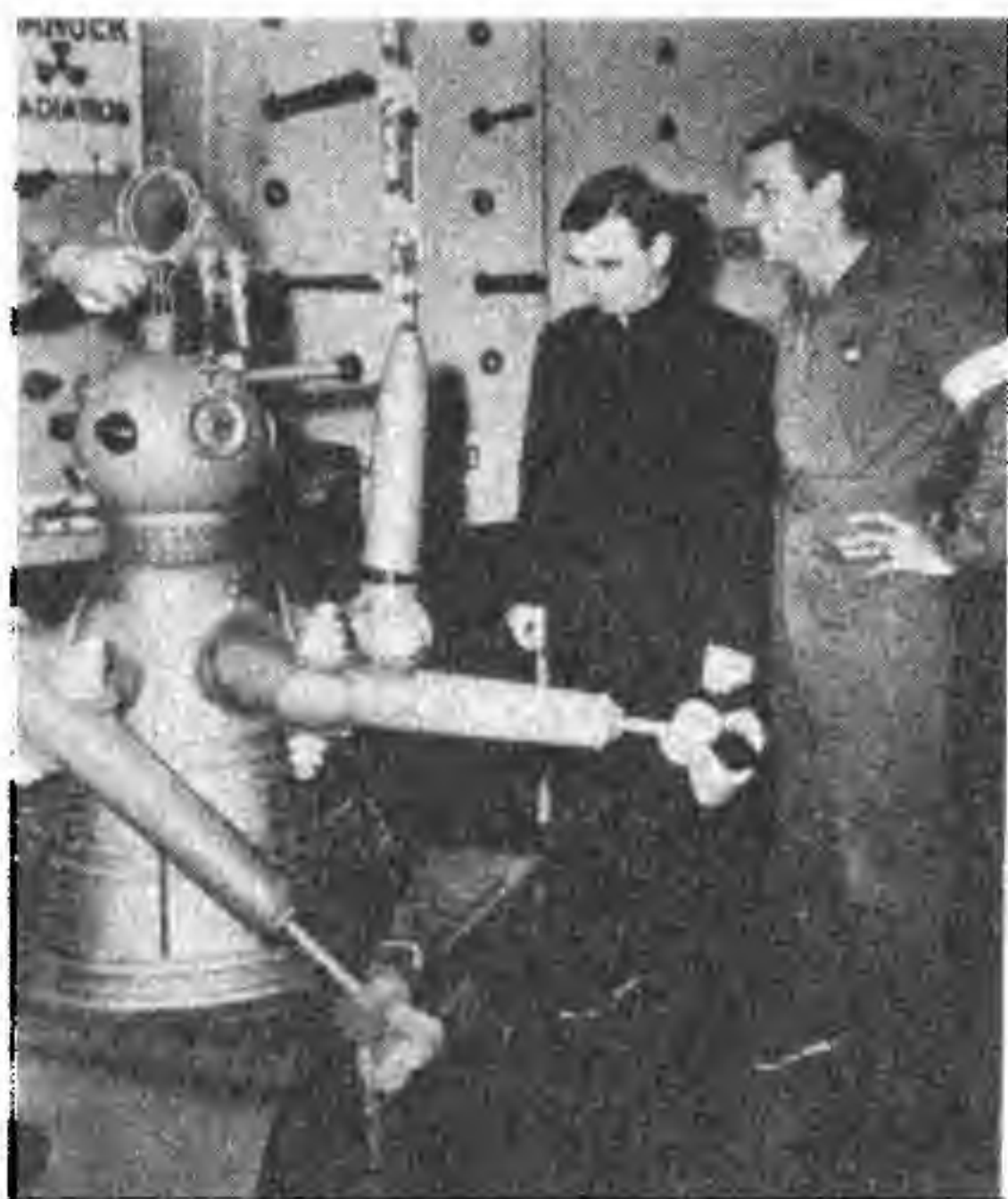


Fig. 4: The non-anthropoid robot Gog from the picture of the same name
(Courtesy: Ivan Tors and United Artists)

buildings. The most medieval thing he saw was a small bat hanging upside down from a rafter, sound asleep. No golem.

Then he traced the way described in the manuscript which the abductors of the golem were supposed to have walked, both when stealing it and when finally disposing of it. Yes, the streets were as the manuscript had told. But the final destination was a kind of dump where the golem could never have been found, provided that it had existed and provided that its clay body had lasted through 300 odd years of internment.

Just to round out the story, Kisch checked on the graves in the Jewish cemetery. He knew

that Rabbi Loew's grave was there. He found those of his pupils. He even found the tombstone of Abraham ben Secharja, stating that he had died in 1602 after serving his synagogue for 30 years.

Kisch wrote the story of his failure. It was published and his report on the golem was directly responsible for the conception of the robots. It was another Prague journalist, Karel Capek, who invented the term. Kisch was bilingual, but was writing in German. Capek was bilingual, too, but wrote in Czech.

Whether the play *R.U.R.* (*Rossum's Universal Robots*) was written originally in German or in Czech is something I don't know. I saw a German version when it was new. Present science fiction fans, knowing that this play introduced an important concept into science fiction, seem to feel that it is one of the classical pieces written for the stage and long to see it performed.

If they should have a chance to see it, they are almost certain to be disappointed. When first performed in Europe around 1922 or 1923, it received bad notices. To make it worse, the panning was deserved. The play was talkative, "preachy," stuffed with the falsest pathos that could be devised. But the term robot (derived from the root word *robota*,

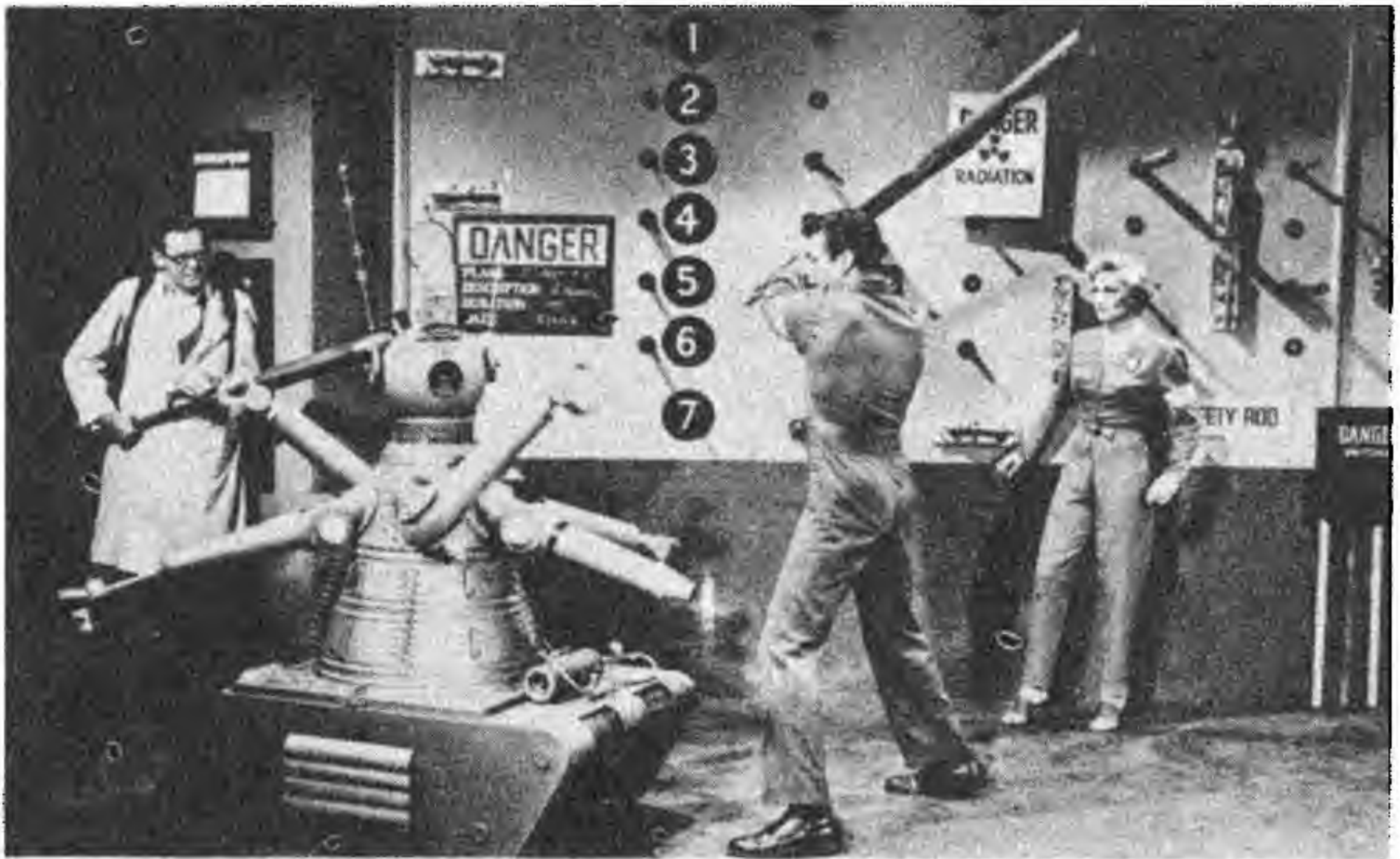


Fig. 5: The robot Gog attacks

(Courtesy: Ivan Tors and United Artists)

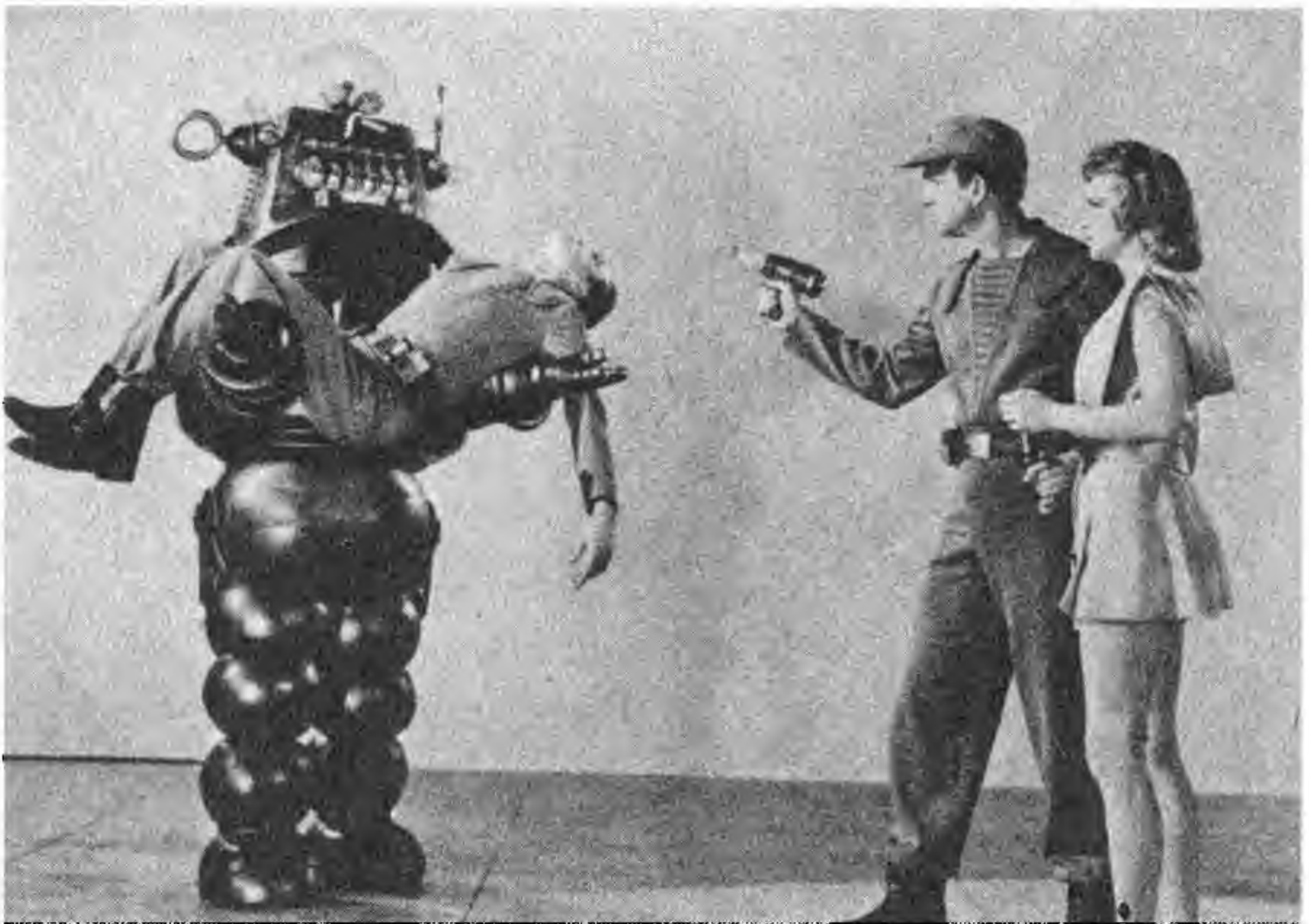


Fig. 6: Robby the Robot from M.G.M.'s *Forbidden Planet*

(Courtesy Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)

meaning "work") has persisted.

The movies, still silent, eyed the new concept, but decided first to bring the golem to the screen directly. It was made by a German firm in the early 'twenties (Fig. 1) and when I think back to it, I always have the feeling that it must have been made by Fritz Lang. Of course I know that he didn't, but it was that type of picture and equally impressive, although my impression now — more than 30 years later — tends to be rather general and more than somewhat hazy.

The movie differed from the legends mainly in the way the golem finds its end. In the movie version, the magic word is imbedded in a capsule on its chest. Running wild, the golem refuses to have it removed. But wandering away from the city, the golem meets a child who offers it an apple. It picks the child up, and the child pulls the capsule from its chest.

BEFORE leaving the golem, I would like to add a linguistic remark. Eastern Jews tend to pronounce the name as "goylem" and have evolved "folk etymology" that the clay figure was called a "goy" (non-Jew) since it obviously was not Jewish. I checked with a dictionary — this piece of layman's etymology is nonsense. The word golem is a



Fig. 7: Robby the Robot as driver of a futuristic car
(Courtesy: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)

genuine Hebrew word, meaning "the germ" or "the formless one" or, stretching the analogy to formlessness a bit, "the fool."

I do not know when a robot appeared for the first time in a science fiction story. The first robot on the screen was very pretty, bore the name of Brigitte Helm (a shortened version of her real name) and was the creation of Fritz Lang in *Metropolis*. Even though the armor had been made form-fitting (Figs. 2 and 3) as accurately and as light as possible, the poor girl could not wear it for long.

Although labeled a creation of science rather than magic, in the film there were still plenty of mystical overtones and ground-

swells. At least I have never seen a laboratory with a glowing pentagram on the wall; the real laboratories even avoid a picture of the Pentagon.

A successful and therefore universally known work of art of any description tends to monopolize a concept for quite a while. As I pointed out once, the fact that Giacomo Meyerbeer used the Tree of Death in the final scene of his opera *l'Africaine* prevented every other composer and librettist from doing the same. If anybody had used the Tree of Death, he would have been accused of cribbing from Meyerbeer, even though he might not have known the opera and gotten his theme directly from Erasmus Darwin, who had publicized it in his *Loves of the Plants*.

Similarly, the robot concept, sub-family movie robots, suffered the same fate because of *Metropolis*.

However, the movies apparently felt that they had to do something along that line, with the result that an evil genius dug up the tale of Frankenstein and his monster.

THE original story had originated in 1816 as one of the results of a literary discussion. The author of the original *Frankenstein*, still Miss Mary Godwin at the time, the poet Shelley, who

was her future husband, the poet Lord Byron, Dr. John W. Polidori, and a few other people were all in Geneva and one day voted that everybody in the party should write a story of the supernatural. Not everybody who agreed to do so finished his story, but among the ones that were finished was *Frankenstein*.

The plot is about as simple as possible. Mr. Frankenstein, who has stumbled across the "secret of life," uses raw material from graves and dissecting rooms to put an eight-foot-tall manlike thing together which, when it comes to life, frightens its own creator out of his wits, even though it is friendly and harmless, merely too big and too ugly to be tolerable.

It would be interesting if one could find out whether Mary Shelley had heard of the golem legend. It is possible because the German dramatist and novelist Clemens Brentano had written about it just at that time. There are some similarities.

Many science fiction authors and readers make a distinction between robots and androids, while others say that there is no sharp borderline. Moreover, if one made that distinction, the robots in Capek's *R. U. R.* would be androids. Perfectly correct—they were. Capek naturally could not foresee what would happen

to the word he coined. Personally, I prefer to make the distinction and my preference is based, in part, on discussions with people outside of science fiction.

These people tend to make a sharp distinction between "artificial men" (androids) of whom they approve as part and parcel of "gothic" literature; and "mechanical men" (robots) of whom they don't approve.

I find myself disliking androids, so I must be in favor of robots, where you can at least have an indicator light up when a gear slips.

AS I said before, robots stayed off the screen for quite some time because of *Metropolis*, but they multiplied in print. And gradually they lost some of the human shape which had been a hangover from golem and *Frankenstein* days. Some robots were angular merely because that was easier to build and also enabled everybody to tell a robot from a person at a glance.

But it was then realized that the human shape is only highly versatile and not always the most efficient. Neither a robot switchboard operator nor a robot bartender needs legs to walk around, but both could do with a few extra sets of arms and hands. (In reality, of course, the whole mechanism would be internal, not

even resembling human arms and hands.)

The non-anthropoid robot took a long time coming to the screen. If I am not mistaken, the two robots Gog and Magog in Ivan Tors' *Gog* were the first. They were amusing, too, and even when they ran wild in the end, it wasn't their fault; somebody had tampered with the main computer which issued orders to them.

Of course the most charming of all robots is still in everybody's memory; namely, Robbie in *Forbidden Planet*. Being an all-purpose robot, Robbie has the general shape of a human. He can drive, make coffee, produce bourbon, carry tools and construction materials, and could even shoot it out with an enemy if a killable enemy were present.

Naturally there will be more robots in more stories and, in all probability, other robots in other movies.

There are also very real robots appearing in industry in many places and for many purposes.

And while I won't dare to make the negative prophecy that the real industrial robots will never have a human shape, the majority of them will unquestionably look what they really are: cabinets full of electronic gear and programming tapes.

—WILLY LEY

the IFTH of OOFTH

By WALTER S. TEVIS, JR.

Farnsworth had to go meddle
in a muddle and the results
. . . well, just wait and see!

FARNSWORTH had invented a new drink that night. He called it a mulled sloe gin toddy. Exactly as fantastic as it sounds—ramming a red-hot poker into a mugful of warm red gin, cinnamon, cloves and sugar, and then *drinking* the fool thing—but like many of Farnsworth's ideas, it managed somehow to work out. In fact, its flavor had become completely accept-

able to me after the third one.

When he finally set the end of his steaming poker back on the coals for rest and regeneration, I leaned back warmly in my big leather chair—the one he had rigged up so that it would gently rock you to sleep if you pressed the right button—and said, “Oliver, your ingenuity is matched only by your hospitality.”

Farnsworth blushed and smiled.

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

He is a small, chubby man and blushes easily. "Thank you," he said. "I have another new one. I call it a jelled vodka fizz — you eat it with a spoon. You may want to try it later. It's — well — exceptional."

I suppressed a shudder at the thought of eating jelled vodka and said, "Interesting, very interesting," and since he didn't reply, we both stared at the fire for a while, letting the gin continue its pleasant work. Farnsworth's bachelor's home was very comfortable and relaxing, and I always enjoyed my Wednesday night visits there thoroughly. I suppose most men have a deep-seated love for open fires and liquor — however fantastically prepared — and deep, comfortable leather armchairs.

Then, after several minutes, Farnsworth abruptly bounced to his feet and said, "There's a thing I wanted to show you. Made it last week. Didn't pull it off too well, though."

"Really?" I said. I'd thought the drinks had been his usual weekly brainchild. They seemed quite enough.

"Yes," he said, trotting over to the door of the study. "It's downstairs in the shop. I'll get it." And he bounced out of the room, the paneled door closing as it had opened, automatically, behind him.

I TURNED back to the fire again, pleased that he had made something in the machine shop — the carpentry shop was in a shed in the backyard; the chemistry and optical labs in the attic — for he was his most proficient with his lathe and milling machines. His self-setting, variable-twist thumb bolt had been a beautiful piece of work and its patent had netted him, as had several other machined devices, a remarkable sum.

He returned in a minute, carrying a very odd-looking thing with him, and set it on the table beside my chair. I examined it silently for a minute while Farnsworth stood over me, half-smiling, his little green eyes wide, sparkling in the reflected, flickering light from the fire. I knew he was suppressing his eagerness for my comment, but I was uncertain what to say.

The thing, upon examination, appeared simple: a more or less cross-shaped construction of several dozen one-inch cubes, half of them of thin, transparent plastic, the other half made of thin little sheets of aluminum. Each cube seemed to be hinged to two others very cunningly and the arrangement of them all was somewhat confusing.

Finally, I said, "How many cubes?" I had tried to count them, but kept getting lost.

"Sixty-four," he said. "I think."
"You *think*?"

"Well—" He seemed embarrassed. "At least I *made* sixty-four cubes, thirty-two of each kind; but somehow I haven't been able to count them since. They seem to . . . get lost, or shift around, or something."

"Oh?" I was becoming interested. "May I pick it up?"

"Certainly," he said, and I took the affair, which was surprisingly lightweight, in my hands and began folding the cubes around on their hinges. I noticed then that some were open on one side and that certain others would fit into these if their hinging arrangements would allow them to.

I began folding them absently and said, "You could count them by marking them one at a time. With a crayon, for instance."

"As a matter of fact," he admitted, blushing again, "I tried that. Didn't seem to work out. When I finished, I found I had marked six cubes with the number one and on none of them could I find a two or three, although there were two fours, one of them written in reverse and in green." He hesitated. "I had used a red marking pencil." I saw him shudder slightly as he said it, although his voice had been casual-sounding enough. "I rubbed the numbers off with a

damp cloth and didn't . . . try it again."

"Well," I said. And then, "What do you call it?"

"A pentaract."

HE SAT back down again in his armchair. "Of course, that name really isn't accurate. I suppose a pentaract should really be a four-dimensional pentagon, and this is meant to be a picture of a five-dimensional cube."

"A *picture*?" It didn't look like a picture to me.

"Well, it couldn't *really* have five - dimensionality — length, width, breadth, ifth and oofth — or I don't think it could." His voice faltered a little at that. "But it's supposed to illustrate what you might call the layout of an object that did have those."

"What kind of object would that be?" I looked back at the thing in my lap and was mildly surprised to see that I had folded a good many of the cubes together.

"Suppose," he said, "you put a lot of points in a row, touching; you have a line — a one-dimensional figure. Put four lines together at right angles and on a plane; a square — two-dimensional. Six squares at right angles and extended into real space give you a cube — three dimensions. And eight cubes extended into four physical dimensions give you

a tesseract, as it's called —"

"And eight tesseracts make a pentaract," I said. "Five dimensions."

"Exactly. But naturally this is just a picture of a pentaract, in that sense. There probably isn't any ifth and oofth at all."

"I still don't know what you mean by a *picture*," I said, pushing the cubes around interestedly.

"You don't?" he asked, pursing his lips. "It's rather awkward to explain, but . . . well, on the surface of a piece of paper, you can make a very realistic picture of a cube — you know, with perspective and shading and all that kind of thing — and what you'd actually be doing would be illustrating a three-dimensional object, the cube, by using only two dimensions to do it with."

"And of course," I said, "you could *fold* the paper into a cube. Then you'd have a real cube."

He nodded. "But you'd have to use the third dimension — by folding the flat paper *up* — to do it. So, unless I could fold my cubes up through ifth or oofth, my pentaract will have to be just a poor picture. Or, really, eight pictures. Eight tesseracts, pictures of four-dimensional objects, stuck together to make a picture of five dimensions."

"Well!" I said, a bit lost. "And what do you plan to use it for?"

"Just curiosity." And then,

abruptly, looking at me now, his eyes grew wide and he bumped up out of his chair. He said breathlessly, "What have you done to it?"

I looked down at my hands. I was holding a little structure of eight cubes, joined together in a small cross. "Why, nothing," I said, feeling a little foolish. "I only folded most of them together."

"That's impossible! There were only twelve open ones to begin with! All of the others were six-sided!"

FARNSWORTH made a grab for it, apparently beside himself, and the gesture was so sudden that I drew back. It made Farnsworth miss his grab and the little object flew from my hands and hit the floor, solidly, on one of its corners. There was a slight bump as it hit, and a faint clicking noise, and the thing seemed to crumple in a very peculiar way. And sitting in front of us on the floor was one little one-inch cube, and nothing else.

For at least a full minute, we stared at it. Then I stood up and looked in my chair seat, looked around the floor of the room, even got down on my knees and peered under the chair. Farnsworth was watching me, and when I finished and sat down again, he asked, "No others?"



"No other cubes," I said, "anywhere."

"I was afraid of that." He pointed an unsteady finger at the one cube in front of us. "I suppose they're all in there." Some of his agitation had begun to wear off — you can, I suppose, get used to anything — and after a moment he said thoughtfully, "What was that you said about folding the paper to make a cube?"

I looked at him and managed an apologetic smile. I had been thinking the same thing. "What was that *you* said about having to go into another dimension to do it?"

He didn't smile back, but he got up and said, "Well, I doubt if it can bite," and bent over and picked the cube up, hefting its weight carefully in his hand. "It seems to weigh the same as the — sixty-four did," he said, quite calmly now. Then he looked at it closely and suddenly became agitated again. "Good heavens! Look at this!" He held it up.

On one side, exactly in the center, was a neat little hole, about a half-inch across.

I moved my head closer to the cube and saw that the hole was not really circular. It was like the iris diaphragm of a camera, a polygon made of many overlapping, straight pieces of metal, allowing an opening for light to

enter. Nothing was visible through the hole; I could see only an undefined blackness.

"I don't understand how . . ." I began, and stopped.

"Nor I," he said. "Let's see if there's anything in here."

HE PUT the cube up to his eye and squinted and peered for a minute. Then he carefully set it on the table, walked to his chair, sat down and folded his hands over his fat little lap.

"George," he said, "there *is* something in there." His voice now was very steady and yet strange.

"What?" I asked. What else do you say?

"A little ball," he said. "A little round ball. Quite misted over, but nonetheless a ball."

"Well!" I said.

"George, I'll get the gin."

He was back from the sideboard in what seemed an incredibly short time. He had the sloe gin in highball glasses, with ice and water. It tasted horrible.

When I finished mine, I said, "Delicious. Let's have another," and we did. After I drank that one, I felt a good deal more rational.

I set my glass down. "Farnsworth, it just occurred to me. Isn't the fourth dimension supposed to be *time*, according to Einstein?"

He had finished his second sloe gin highball, unmulled, by then. "Supposed to be, yes, according to Einstein. I call it ifth—or oofth—take your pick." He held up the cube again, much more confidently now, I noticed. "And what about the *fifth* dimension?"

"Beats me," I said, looking at the cube, which was beginning to seem vaguely sinister to me. "Beats the hell out of me."

"Beats me, too, George," he said almost gaily—an astonishing mood for old Farnsworth. He turned the cube around with his small, fat fingers. "This is probably all wrapped up in time in some strange way. Not to mention the very peculiar kind of space it appears to be involved with. Extraordinary, don't you think?"

"Extraordinary," I nodded.

"George, I think I'll take another look." And he put the cube back to his eye again. "Well," he said, after a moment of squinting, "same little ball."

"What's it doing?" I wanted to know.

"Nothing. Or perhaps spinning a bit. I'm not sure. It's quite fuzzy, you see, and misty. Dark in there, too."

"Let me see," I said, realizing that, after all, if Farnsworth could see the thing in there, so could I.

"In a minute. I wonder what sort of time I'm looking into—

past or future, or what?"

"And what sort of space . . ." I was saying when, suddenly, little Farnsworth let out a fantastic shriek, dropped the cube as if it had suddenly turned into a snake, and threw his hands over his eyes.

He sank back into his chair and cried, "My God! My God!"

I WAS apprehensive when the cube hit the floor, but nothing happened to it. It did not fold up into no cube at all, nor proliferate back into sixty-four of itself.

"What happened?" I asked, rushing over to Farnsworth, who was squirming about in his armchair, his face still hidden by his hands.

"My eye!" he moaned, almost sobbing. "It stabbed my eye! Quick, George, call me an ambulance!"

I hurried to the telephone and fumbled with the book, looking for the right number, until Farnsworth said, "Quick, George!" again and, in desperation, I dialed the operator and told her to send us an ambulance.

When I got back to Farnsworth, he had taken his hand from the unhurt eye and I could see that a trickle of blood was beginning to run down the other wrist. He had almost stopped squirming, but from his face it

was obvious that the pain was still quite intense.

He stood up. "I need another drink," he said, and began heading unsteadily for the sideboard, when he stepped on the cube, which was still lying in front of his chair, and was barely able to keep himself from falling headlong, tripping on it. The cube skidded a few feet, stopping, hole-side up, near the fire.

He said to the cube, enraged, "Drat you, I'll show you . . . !" and he reached down and swooped up the poker from the hearth. It had been lying there for mulling drinks, its end resting on the coals, and by now it was a brilliant cherry red. He took the handle with both hands and plunged the red-hot tip into the hole of the cube, pushing it down against the floor.

"I'll show you!" he yelled again, and I watched understandingly as he shoved with all his weight, pushing and twisting, forcing the poker down with angry energy. There was a faint hissing sound and little wisps of dark smoke came from the hole, around the edges of the poker.

Then there was a strange, sucking noise and the poker began to sink into the cube. It must have gone in at least eight or ten inches — completely impossible, of course, since it was a one-inch cube — and even Farnsworth be-

came so alarmed at this that he abruptly yanked the poker out of the hole.

As he did, black smoke arose in a little column for a moment and then there was a popping sound and the cube fell apart, scattering itself into hundreds of little squares of plastic and aluminum.

Oddly enough, there were no burn marks on the aluminum and none of the plastic seemed to have melted. There was no sign of a little, misty ball.

Farnsworth returned his right hand to his now puffy and quite bloody eye. He stood staring at the profusion of little squares with his good eye. His free hand was trembling.

Then there was the sound of a siren, becoming louder. He turned and looked at me balefully. "That must be the ambulance. I suppose I'd better get my toothbrush."

FARNSWORTH lost the eye. Within a week, though, he was pretty much his old chipper self again, looking quite dapper with a black leather patch. One interesting thing — the doctor remarked that there were powder burns of some sort on the eyelid, and that the eye itself appeared to have been destroyed by a small explosion. He assumed that it had been a case of a gun mis-

firing, the cartridge exploding in an open breech somehow. Farnsworth let him think that; it was as good an explanation as any.

I suggested to Farnsworth that he ought to get a green patch, to match his other eye. He laughed at the idea and said he thought it might be a bit showy. He was already starting work on another pentaract; he was going to find out just what . . .

But he never finished. Nine days after the accident, there was a sudden flurry of news reports from the other side of the world, fantastic stories that made the Sunday supplements go completely mad with delight, and we began to guess what had happened. There wouldn't be any need to build the sixty-four-cube cross and try to find a way of folding it up. We knew now.

It *had* been a five-dimensional cube, all right. And one extension of it had been in time — into the future; nine days into the future — and the other extension had been into a most peculiar kind of space, one that distorted sizes quite strangely.

All of this became obvious when, three days later, it happened on our side of the world and the Sunday supplements were scooped by the phenomenon itself, which, by its nature, required no newspaper reporting.

Across the entire sky of the

Western hemisphere there appeared — so vast that it eclipsed the direct light of the Sun from Fairbanks, Alaska, to Cape Horn — a tremendous human eye, with a vast, glistening, green pupil. Part of the lid was there, too, and all of it was as if framed in a gigantic circle. Or not exactly a circle, but a polygon of many sides, like the iris diaphragm of a camera shutter.

Toward nightfall, the eye blinked once and probably five hundred million people screamed simultaneously. It remained there all of the night, glowing balefully in the reflected sunlight, obliterating the stars.

A thousand new religious cults were formed that night, and a thousand old ones proclaimed the day as The One Predicted for Centuries.

Probably more than half the people on Earth thought it was God. Only two knew that it was Oliver Farnsworth, peering at a misty little spinning ball in a five-dimensional box, nine days before, totally unaware that the little ball was the Earth itself, contained in a little one-inch cube that was an enclave of swollen time and shrunken space.

WHEN I had dropped the pentaract and had somehow caused it to fold itself into two new dimensions, it had reached

out through fifth-dimensional space and folded the world into itself, and had begun accelerating the time within it, in rough proportion to size, so that as each minute passed in Farnsworth's study, about one day was passing on the world within the cube.

We knew this because about a minute had passed while Farnsworth had held his eye against the cube the second time—the first time had, of course, been the appearance over Asia—and nine days later, when we saw the same event from our position on the Earth in the cube, it was twenty-six hours before the eye was “stabbed” and withdrew.

It happened early in the morning, just after the Sun had left the horizon and was passing into eclipse behind the great circle that contained the eye. Someone stationed along a defense-perimeter station panicked—someone highly placed. Fifty guided missiles were launched, straight up, the most powerful on Earth. Each carried a hydrogen warhead. Even before the great shock wave from their explosion came crashing down to Earth, the eye had disappeared.

Somewhere, I knew, an unimaginably vast Oliver Farnsworth was squirming and yelping, carrying out the identical chain of events that I had seen happening in the past and that yet must be

happening now, along the immutable space-time continuum that Farnsworth's little cube had somehow by-passed.

The doctor had talked of powder burns. I wondered what he would think if he knew that Farnsworth had been hit in the eye with fifty infinitesimal hydrogen bombs.

For a week, there was nothing else to talk about in the world. Two billion people probably discussed, thought about and dreamed of nothing else. There had been no more dramatic happening since the creation of the Earth and Sun than the appearance of Farnsworth's eye.

But two people, out of those two billion, thought of something else. They thought of the unchangeable, pre-set space-time continuum, moving at the rate of one minute for every day that passed here on our side of the pentaract, while that vast Oliver Farnsworth and I, in the other-space, other-time, were staring at the cube that contained our world, lying on their floor.

On Wednesday, we could say, *Now he's gone to the telephone.* On Thursday, *Now he's looking through the book.* On Saturday, *By now he must be dialing the operator . . .*

And on Tuesday morning, when the Sun came up, we were together and saw it rise, for we

spent our nights together by then, because we had lost the knack of sleeping and did not want to be alone; and when the day had begun, we didn't say it, because we couldn't. But we thought it.

We thought of a colossal, cos-

mic Farnsworth saying, "I'll show you!" and shoving, pushing and twisting, forcing with all of his might, into the little round hole, a brilliantly glowing, hissing, smoking, red-hot poker.

—WALTER S. TEVIS, JR.



FORECAST

The idea of getting warriors back to one's own lines after they have been cut off by the enemy has always been a military goal. But not until recently was the technology available—so much so that the items supplied would bemuse scientists, not to mention soldiers, of only a generation ago. That is the basis of Frederik Pohl's novelet next month, which shows just why it isn't fair that a smart but luckless man like Mooney has to scrounge to make a living . . . while Harse is never bothered with the problem of how to live luxuriously . . . simply because he has a SURVIVAL KIT. There you have the title and the premise of Pohl's story, but wait till you learn what's in that survival kit and what it can do!

Fritz Leiber is back and GALAXY has him! After what may prove to be the longest layoff in the history of science fiction — which is much less important than that it was the most missed — he returns with an ingenious and moving novelet entitled TIME IN THE ROUND. Only Leiber could make a touching story out of this dilemma: poor Butcher suffers more than any dictator ever did — for everybody gives in to him because he is so punny and they are so impregnable! (The reason for the glad movie-type exclamation at the beginning of this paragraph: Leiber promises that this is just the first of many stories for GALAXY. Reason enough for Hollywood-type glee, wouldn't you say?)

There will be another novelet . . . short stories, of course . . . our regular features . . . and Willy Ley turns lawyer in WHO'LL OWN THE PLANETS? . . . A legal hearing in which he settles — beforehand — the real-estate disputes that would otherwise arise as soon as we head into space!

The

HADWELL stared at the planet below. A tremor of excitement ran through him, for it was a beautiful world of green plains and red mountains and restless blue-gray seas. His ship's instruments quickly gathered their information and decided that the planet was eminently suited for human life. Hadwell punched a deceleration orbit and opened his notebook.

He was a writer, the author of *White Shadows in the Asteroid Belt*, *The Saga of Deepest Space* and *Terira—Planet of Mystery!* He was starting his newest book, entitled *Wanderings of a Spaceship Vagabond*.

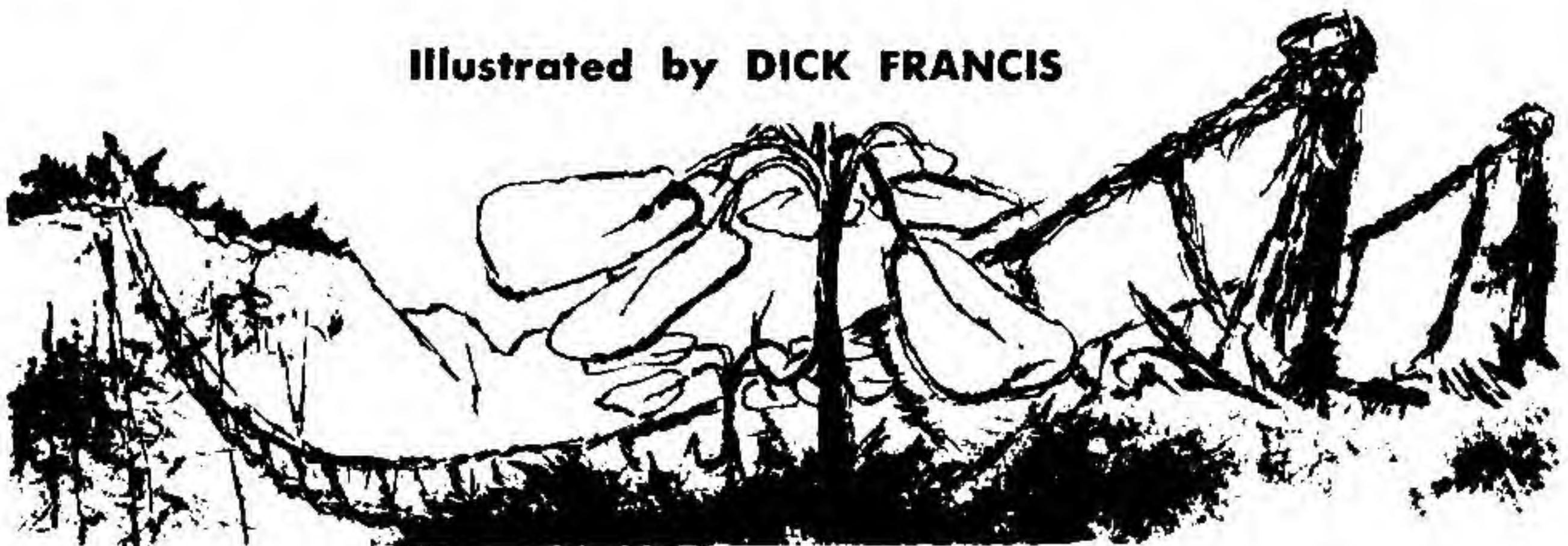
He wrote, "The planet looms below me, inviting and enigmatic,

a challenge to the imagination. What will I find here, I, the vagabond from beyond the stars? What strange mysteries lie beneath the verdant green cover? Will there be danger? Love? Fulfillment? Will there be a resting place for a weary wanderer?"

Richard Hadwell was a tall, thin, red-headed young man. He had inherited a sizable sum from his father and had invested it in a CC-Class Space Schooner. In this elderly craft, he had voyaged for the past six years and had written ecstatic books about the places he had seen. But the ecstasy had been counterfeit, for alien planets were disappointing places.

Most extraterrestrials, Hadwell

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS



Victim from Space

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

*A time to sow, a time to reap, a time to
live—all the Igathians agreed with this
—but not when it came to a time to die!*



had found, were remarkably stupid and amazingly ugly. Their foods were impossible and their manners deplorable. Unfortunately, the public wasn't interested in that sort of detail. So Hadwell wrote romances and hoped someday to live one.

The planet below was cityless, tropical, beautiful. His ship was already homing on a small thatch-hut village.

"Perhaps I'll find it here," Hadwell said to himself as the spaceship began braking sharply.

EARLY that morning, Kataga and his daughter Mele crossed the bridge of vines to Ragged Mountain, to gather frag blossoms. Nowhere on Igathi did the frag bloom so lustily as it did on Ragged Mountain. And this was as it should be, for the mountain was sacred to Thangookari, the smiling god.

Later in the day, they were joined by Brog, a dull-faced youth of no significance whatsoever, except to himself.

Mele had the feeling that something very important was about to happen. She was a tall, slender girl and she worked as though in a trance, moving slowly and dreamily, her long black hair tossed by the wind. Familiar objects seemed imbued with unusual clarity and significance. She gazed at the village, a tiny cluster

of huts across the river, and with wonder looked behind her at the Pinnacle, where all Igathian marriages were performed, and beyond that to the delicately tinted sea.

She was the prettiest girl in Igathi; even the old priest admitted it. She longed for a dramatic role in life. But village life droned on and here she was, picking frag blossoms under two hot suns.

It seemed very unfair.

Her father gathered frag energetically, humming as he worked. He knew that the blossoms would soon be fermenting in the village vat. Lag, the priest, would mumble suitable words over the brew and a libation would be poured in front of Thangookari's image. When these formalities were concluded, the entire village, dogs included, would go on a splendid drunk.

These thoughts made the work go faster. Also, Kataga had evolved a subtle and dangerous scheme to increase his prestige. It made for very pleasant speculation.

Brog straightened up, mopped his face with the end of his loincloth and glanced overhead for signs of rain.

"Look!" he shouted.

Kataga and Mele stared up.

"There!" Brog screamed. "There, up there!"

IN THE sky, a silver speck surrounded by red and green flames was descending slowly, growing larger as they watched, and resolving into a shiny sphere.

"The prophecy!" Kataga murmured reverently. "At last—after all the centuries of waiting!"

"Let's tell the village!" Mele cried.

"Wait," Brog said. He flushed and dug his toe into the ground. "I saw it first, you know."

"Of course you did," Mele said impatiently.

"And since I saw it first," Brog continued, "thereby rendering an important service to the village, don't you think—wouldn't it be proper—"

Brog wanted what every Igathian desired, worked and prayed for, and what intelligent men like Kataga cast subtle schemes for. But it was unseemly to call the desired thing by name. Mele and her father understood, however.

"What do you think?" Kataga asked.

"I suppose he *does* deserve something," Mele said.

Brog rubbed his hands together. "Would you, Mele? Would you do it yourself?"

"However," Mele said, "the whole thing is up to the priest."

"Please!" Brog begged. "Lag might not feel I'm ready. Please, Kataga! Do it yourself!"

Kataga studied his daughter's

inflexible expression and sighed. "Sorry, Brog. If it were just between us . . . But Mele is scrupulously orthodox. Let the priest decide."

Brog nodded, completely defeated. Overhead, the shiny sphere dropped lower, toward the level plain near the village. The three Igathi gathered their sacks of frag blossoms and began the trek home.

They reached the bridge of vines, which spanned a raging mountain river. Kataga sent Brog first and Mele next. Then he followed, drawing a small knife he had concealed in his loincloth.

As he had expected, Mele and Brog didn't look back. They were too busy keeping their balance on the flimsy, swaying structure. When Kataga reached the center of the bridge, he ran his fingers beneath the main supporting vine. In a moment, he found the worn spot he had located days earlier. Quickly he drew his knife across the spot and felt the fibers part. Another slash or two and the vine would snap under a man's weight.

But this was enough for now. Well satisfied with himself, Kataga replaced the knife in his loincloth and hurried after Brog and Mele.

THE village came alive at the news of the visitor. Men and women rushed back and forth dis-

cussing the great event and an impromptu dance began in front of the Shrine of the Instrument. But it stopped when the old priest hobbled out of the Temple of Thangookari.

Lag, the priest, was a tall, emaciated old man. After years of service, his face had grown to resemble the smiling, benevolent god he worshiped. On his bald head was the feathered crown of the priestly caste, and he leaned heavily on a sacred black mace.

The people gathered in front of him. Brog stood near the priest, rubbing his hands together hopefully, but frightened to press for his reward.

"My people," Lag said, "the ancient prophecy of the Igathi is now to be fulfilled. A great gleaming sphere has dropped from the heavens, as the old legends predicted. Within the sphere will be a being such as ourselves and he will be an emissary of Thangookari."

The people nodded, faces rapt.

"The emissary will be a doer of great things! He will perform acts of good such as no man has ever before seen. And when he has completed his work and claimed his rest, he will expect his reward."

Lag's voice fell to an impressive whisper. "This reward is what every Igathian desires, dreams of, prays for. It is the final

behest which Thangookari grants to those who serve him and the village well."

The priest turned to Brog. "You, Brog, have been the first to witness the coming of the emissary. You have served the village well." The priest raised his arms. "Friends! Do you feel that Brog should receive the reward he craves?"

Most of the people felt he should. But Vassi, a wealthy merchant, stepped forward, frowning.

"It isn't equitable," he said. "The rest of us work toward this for years and give expensive gifts to the temple. Brog hasn't done enough to merit even the most basic reward. Besides, he's humbly born."

"**Y**OU have a point," the priest admitted, and Brog groaned audibly. "But," Lag continued, "the bounty of Thangookari is not only for the high-born. The humblest citizen may aspire to it. If Brog were not suitably rewarded, would not others lose hope?"

The people roared their assent and Brog's eyes grew wet with thankfulness.

"Kneel, Brog," said the priest, and his face seemed to radiate kindness and love.

Brog knelt. The villagers held their breath.

Lag lifted his heavy mace and

brought it down with all his strength on Brog's skull. It was a good blow, squarely struck. Brog collapsed, squirmed once, and expired. His expression of joy was beautiful to behold.

"How lovely it was," Kataga murmured enviously.

Mele grasped his arm. "Don't worry, Father. Someday you will have your reward."

"I hope so," Kataga said. "But how can I be sure? Look at Rii. A nicer, more pious fellow never lived. That poor old man worked and prayed all his life for a violent death. Any kind of violent death. And what happened? He passed away in his sleep. What kind of death is that for a man?"

"There are always one or two exceptions."

"I could name a dozen others," Kataga said. "Two dozen!"

"Try not to worry about it, Father," Mele soothed. "I know you'll die beautifully, like Brog."

"Yes, yes. . . But if you think about it, Brog's was such a *simple* ending." His eyes lighted up. "I would like something really big, something painful and complicated and wonderful, like the emissary will have."

Mele looked away. "That is presuming above your station, Father."

"True, true. Oh, well, someday. . ." He smiled to himself. Someday indeed! An intelligent

and courageous man took matters into his own hands and arranged for his own violent death, instead of waiting for the old priest to make up his feeble mind. Call it heresy or anything else, Kataga told himself, a man had the right to die as painfully and violently as he pleased -- if he could get away with it.

The thought of the half-severed vine filled him with satisfaction. How fortunate he had never learned how to swim!

"Come," Mele said. "Let's welcome the emissary."

They followed the villagers to the level plain where the sphere had landed.

RICHARD HADWELL leaned back in his padded pilot's chair and wiped perspiration from his forehead. The last natives had just left his ship and he could hear them singing and laughing as they returned to their village in the evening twilight. His ship smelled of flowers and honey and wine, and drum-beats seemed to echo still from the gray metal walls.

He smiled reminiscently and took down his notebook. Selecting a stylus, he wrote:

"Beautiful to behold is Igathi, a place of stately mountains and raging mountain streams, beaches of black sand, riotous vegetation in the jungles, great flowering

trees in the forested glades."

Not bad, Hadwell told himself. He pursed his lips and continued.

"The people here are a handsome humanoid race, a light tan in coloration, comely to behold. They greeted me with flowers and dancing and many signs of joy and affection. I had no trouble hypnopeding their language and soon felt as though this had always been my home. They are a light-hearted, laughter-loving people, gentle and courteous, living serenely in a state of near-nature. What a lesson is here for Civilized Man!

"One's heart goes out to them, and to Thangookari, their benevolent diety. One hopes that Civilized Man, with his genius for destruction and frenetic behavior, does not come here, to turn these folk from their path of moderation."

Hadwell selected a stylus with a finer point and wrote, "There is a girl named Mele who—" He crossed out the line and wrote, "A black-haired girl named Mele, lovely beyond compare, came close to me and gazed deep into my eyes—" He crossed that out, too.

Frowning deeply, he tried several possible lines:

"Her limpid brown eyes gave promise of joys beyond—"

"Her small red mouth quivered ever so slightly when I—"

"Though her small hand rested on my arm for but a moment—"

He crumpled the page. Five months of enforced celibacy in space was having its effect, he decided. He had better return to the main issue and leave Mele for later.

He wrote, "There are many ways in which a sympathetic observer such as myself could help these people. Medically, for example. But the temptation is strong to do absolutely *nothing*, for fear of disrupting their culture and breeding dissatisfaction."

Closing his notebook, Hadwell looked out a port at the distant village, now lighted by torches. Then he opened the notebook again.

"But their culture appears to be strong and flexible. Certain kinds of aid can do nothing but profit them. And these I will freely give."

He closed the notebook with a snap and put away his stylus.

THE following day, Hadwell began his good works. He found many Igathi suffering from a variety of diseases transmitted by migratory vegetation. By judicious selection of antibiotics, he was able to arrest all except the most advanced cases. Then he directed work teams to drain the fields where the hobo plants bred.

As he went on his healing

rounds, Mele accompanied him. The beautiful Igathian girl quickly learned the rudiments of nursing and Hadwell found her assistance invaluable.

Soon, all significant disease was cleared up in the village. Hadwell then began to spend his days in a sunny grove not far from Igathi, where he rested and worked on his book.

A town meeting was called at once by Lag, to discuss the import of this.

"Friends," said the old priest, "our friend Hadwell has done wonderful things for the village. He has cured our sick, so that they, too, may live to partake of Thangookari's gift. Now Hadwell is tired and rests in the sun. Now Hadwell expects the reward he came here for."

"It is fitting," the merchant Vassi said, "that the emissary receive his reward. I suggest that the priest take his mace and go forth --"

"Why so stingy?" asked Juele, a priest-in-training. "Is Thangookari's messenger deserving of no finer death? Hadwell merits better than the mace! Much better!"

"You are right," Vassi admitted slowly. "In that case, I recommend that we drive poisonous legenberry quills under his fingernails."

"Maybe that's good enough for a merchant," said Tgara, the

stone-cutter, "but not for Hadwell. He deserves a chief's death! I move that we tie him down and kindle a small fire at his toes, gradually --"

"Wait," said Lag. "The emissary has earned the Death of an Adept. Therefore let him be taken, tenderly and firmly, to the nearest giant anthill and there be buried to his neck."

There were shouts of approval. Tgara said, "And as long as he screams, the ceremonial drums will pound."

"And there will be dances for him," said Vassi.

"And a glorious drunk," Kataga added.

Everyone agreed that it would be an enviable death.

So the final details were decided and a time set. The village throbbed with excitement and religious ecstasy. All the huts were decorated with flowers, except the Shrine of the Instrument, which naturally had to remain bare. The women laughed and sang as they prepared the death feast. Only Mele, for some unaccountable reason, was forlorn. With lowered head, she walked through the village and climbed slowly to the hills beyond, to Hadwell.

HADWELL was stripped to the waist and basking under the two suns. "Hi, Mele," he said.

"I heard the drums. Is something up?"

"There will be a celebration," Mele replied, sitting down beside him.

"That's nice. All right if I attend?"

Mele stared at him, nodding slowly. Her heart melted at the sight of such courage. The emissary was showing a true observance of the ancient punctilio, by which a man pretended that his own death feast was something that really didn't concern him at all. Men in this day and age were not able to maintain the necessary aplomb. But, of course, an emissary of Thangookari would follow the rules better than anyone.

"How soon does it start?" he asked.

"In an hour," Mele said. Formerly she had been straightforward and free with him. Now her heart was heavy, oppressed. She didn't know why. Shyly she glanced at his bright alien garments, his red hair.

"Oughta be nice," Hadwell mused. "Yessir, it oughta be mighty nice. . ." His voice trailed away.

From under his lowered eyelids, he looked at the comely Igathian girl, observed the pure line of neck and shoulder, her straight dark hair, and sensed rather than smelled her faint

sachet. Nervously he plucked a blade of grass.

"Mele," he said, "I —"

The words died on his lips. Suddenly, startingly, she was in his arms.

"Oh, Mele!"

"Hadwell!" she cried, and strained close to him. Abruptly she pulled free, looking at him with worried eyes.

"What's the matter, honey?"

"Hadwell, is there anything more you could do for the village? *Anything?* My people would appreciate it so."

"Sure there is," Hadwell said. "But I thought I'd rest up first, take it easy."

"No! Please!" she begged. "Those irrigation ditches you spoke of. Could you start them now?"

"If you want me to, honey," Hadwell said. "But—"

"Oh, darling!" She sprang to her feet.

Hadwell reached for her, but she stepped back.

"There is no time! I must hurry and tell the village!"

She ran from him. And Hadwell was left to ponder the strange ways of aliens, and particularly of alien women.

MELE ran back to the village and found the priest in the temple, praying for wisdom and guidance. Quickly she told him

about the emissary's new plans for aiding the village.

The old priest nodded slowly. "Then the ceremony shall be deferred. But tell me, daughter, why are you involved in this?"

Mele blushed and could not answer.

The old priest smiled. But then his face became stern. "I understand. But listen to me, girl. Do not allow love to sway you from the proper worship of Thangookari and from the observances of the ancient and honorable ways of our village."

"Of course not!" Mele said. "I simply felt that an Adept's death was not good enough for Hadwell. He deserves more! He deserves — the Ultimate!"

"**N**O MAN has been worthy of the Ultimate for six hundred years. Not since the demigod V'ktat saved the Igathian race from the dread Huelva Beasts."

"But Hadwell has the stuff of heroes in him. Give him time, let him strive! He will prove worthy!"

"Perhaps so," the priest said doubtfully. "It would be a great thing for the village. . . But consider, Mele. It might take a lifetime for Hadwell to prove himself."

"Wouldn't it be worth waiting for?"

The old priest fingered his mace and his forehead wrinkled in thought. "You may be right. Yes, you may be right."

Suddenly he straightened and glanced sharply at her. "But tell me the truth, Mele. Are you really trying to preserve him for the Ultimate Death? Or do you merely want to keep him for yourself?"

"He must have the death he deserves," Mele answered serenely.

But she was unable to meet the priest's eye.

"I wonder," the old man said. "I wonder what lies in your heart. I think you tread dangerously close to heresy, Mele — you who were among the most orthodox."

Mele was about to answer, when the merchant Vassi rushed into the temple.

"Come quickly!" he cried. "It is the farmer Iglai! *He has evaded the taboo!*"

They hurried after him to the death scene.

The fat, jolly farmer had died a terrible death. He had been walking his usual route from his hut to the village center, past an old thorn tree. Without warning, the tree had toppled on him. Thorns had impaled him through and through. Eyewitnesses said the farmer had writhed and moaned for over an hour before expiring.

But he had died with a smile on his face.

THE priest looked at the crowd surrounding Iglai's body. Several of the villagers were hiding grins behind their hands. Lag walked over to the thorn tree and examined it. There were faint marks of a saw blade, which had been roughened over and concealed with clay.

The priest turned to the crowd. "Was Iglai near this tree very often?"

"He sure was," another farmer said. "Always ate his lunch under this tree."

The crowd was laughing openly now, proud of Iglai's achievement. Remarks began to fly back and forth.

"I wondered why he always ate here."

"Never wanted company. Said he liked to eat alone."

"Hah!"

"He must have been sawing all the time."

"For months, probably. That's tough wood."

"Very clever of Iglai."

"I'll say! He was only a farmer and no one would call him religious — but he got himself a damned fine death."

"Listen, good people!" cried Lag. "Iglai did a sacrilegious thing! Only a priest can grant violent death!"

"What the priests don't see can't hurt them," someone retorted.

"So it was sacrilege," another man said. "Iglai got himself a fine death. *That's* the important thing."

The old priest turned sadly away.

There was not a thing he could do. If he had caught Iglai in time, he would have applied strict sanctions. Iglai would never have dared arrange another death



and would probably have died quietly and sheepishly in bed, at a ripe old age.

But now it was too late. The farmer had his death and had already gone to Rookechangi on the wings of it. Asking the god to punish Iglai in the afterlife was useless, for the farmer was right there on the spot to plead his own case.

Lag asked, "Didn't any of you see him sawing that tree?"

If anyone had, he wouldn't ad-

mit it. They stuck together, Lag knew. In spite of the religious training he had instilled in them from earliest childhood, they persisted in trying to outwit the priests.

When would they realize that an unauthorized death could never be as satisfying as a death one worked for, deserved and had performed with all ceremonial observations?

He sighed. Life was a burden sometimes.



A WEEK later, Hadwell wrote in his diary: "There has never been a race like these Igathians. I have lived among them now, eaten and drunk with them, and observed their ceremonies. I know and understand them. And the truth about them is startling, to say the least.

"The fact is, *the Igathians do not know the meaning of war!* Consider that, Civilized Man! Never in all their recorded and oral history have they had one. They simply cannot conceive of it. I give the following illustration.

"I tried to explain war to Kataga, father of the incomparable Mele. The man scratched his head and inquired, 'You say that many kill many? That is war?'

"'That's a part of it,' I said. 'Thousands killing thousands.'

"'In that case,' Kataga said, 'many are dead at the same time, in the same way?'

"'Correct,' said I.

"He pondered this for a long time, then turned to me and said, 'It is not good for many to die at the same time in the same way. Not satisfactory. Every man should die his own individual death.'

"Consider, Civilized Man, the incredible naivete of that reply. And yet think of the considerable truth which resides beneath the naivete, a truth which all might do well to learn.

"Moreover, these people do not engage in quarrels among themselves, have no blood feuds, no crimes of passion, no murder.

"The conclusion I come to is this: Violent death is *unknown* among these people—except, of course, for accidents.

"It is a shame that accidents occur so often here and are almost invariably fatal. But this I ascribe to the wildness of the surroundings and to the light-hearted, devil-may-care nature of the people. And as a matter of fact, even accidents do not go unnoticed and unchecked. The priest, with whom I have formed a considerable friendship, deplores the high accident rate and is constantly militating against it. Always he urges his people to observe more caution.

"He is a good man.

"And now I write the final, most wonderful news of all."

Hadwell smiled self-consciously, hesitated for a moment, then returned to his notebook.

"Mele has consented to become my wife! As soon as I complete this section of my book, the ceremony begins. Already the festivities have started, the feast prepared. I consider myself the most fortunate of men, for Mele is a beautiful woman. And a most unusual woman, as well.

"She has great social consciousness. A little too much, perhaps.

She has been urging me constantly to do things for the village. And I have done much. I have completed an irrigation system for them, introduced several fast-growing food crops, started the profession of metal-working, and other things too numerous to mention. And she wants me to do more, much more.

"But here I have put my foot down. I have a right to rest. I want a long, languorous honeymoon and then a year or so of basking in the suns and finishing my book.

"Mele finds this difficult to understand. She keeps on trying to tell me that I *must* continue helping her people. And she speaks of some ceremony involving the 'Ultimate' (if my translation is correct).

"But I have done enough work. I refused to do more, for a year or two, at least.

"This 'Ultimate' ceremony is to take place directly after our wedding. I suppose it will be some high honor or other that these simple people wish to bestow on me. I have signified my willingness to accept it.

"It should be highly interesting."

FOR the wedding, the entire village, led by the old priest, marched to the Pinnacle, where all Igathian marriages were per-

formed. The men wore ceremonial feathers and the women were decked in shell jewelry and iridescent stones. Four husky villagers in the center of the procession bore a strange-looking apparatus. Hadwell caught only a glimpse of it, but he knew it had been taken, with tedious ceremony, from a plain black-thatched hut which seemed to be a shrine of some sort.

In single file, they proceeded over the shaky bridge of vines. Kataga, bringing up the rear, grinned to himself as he secretly slashed again at the worn spot.

The Pinnacle was a narrow spur of black rock thrust out over the sea. Hadwell and Mele stood on the end of it, faced by the priest. The people fell silent as Lag raised his arms.

"O great Thangookari!" the priest cried. "Cherish this man Hadwell, your emissary, who has come to us from out of the sky in a shining vehicle, and who has done service for the Igathi such as no man has ever done. And cherish your daughter Mele. Teach her to love the memory of her husband—and to remain strong in her tribal beliefs."

The priest stared hard at Mele as he said that. And Mele, her head held high, gave him look for look.

"I now pronounce you," said

the priest, "man and wife!"

Hadwell clasped his wife in his arms and kissed her. The people cheered. Kataga grinned his sly grin.

"And now," said the priest in his gentlest voice, "I have good news for you, Hadwell. Great news!"

"Oh?" Hadwell said, reluctantly releasing his bride.

"We have judged you," said Lag, "and we have found you worthy — of the Ultimate!"

"Why, thanks," Hadwell said.

The priest motioned. Four men came up lugging the strange apparatus which Hadwell had glimpsed earlier. Now he saw that it was a platform the size of a large bed, made of some ancient-looking black wood. Lashed to the frame were various barbs, hooks, sharpened shells and needle-shaped thorns. There were cups, which contained no liquid as yet. And there were other things, strange in shape, whose purpose Hadwell could not guess.

"Not for six hundred years," said Lag, "has the Instrument been removed from the Shrine of the Instrument. Not since the days of V'ktat, the hero-god who single-handed saved the Igathian people from destruction. But it has been removed for you, Hadwell!"

"Really, I'm not worthy," Hadwell protested, succeeding in

working up a blush.

A murmur rose from the crowd at such modesty.

"Believe me," Lag said earnestly, "you are worthy. Do you accept the Ultimate, Hadwell?"

Hadwell looked at Mele. He could not read the expression on her lovely face. He looked at the priest. Lag's face was impassive. The crowd was deathly still. Hadwell looked at the Instrument. He didn't like its appearance. A doubt began to creep across his mind.

Had he misjudged these people? That Instrument must have been used for torture at some ancient time. Those barbs and hooks. . . But what were the other things for? Thinking hard, Hadwell conceived some of their possible usages. He shuddered.

The crowd was closely packed in front of him. Behind him was the narrow point of rock and a sheer thousand-foot drop below it. Hadwell looked again at Mele.

The love and devotion in her face were unmistakable.

Glancing at the villagers, he saw their concern for him. What was he worried about? They would never do anything to harm him, not after all he had done for the village.

The Instrument undoubtedly had some symbolic use.

"I accept the Ultimate," Hadwell said to the priest.



THE villagers shouted, a deep-throated roar that echoed from the mountains. They formed closely around him, smiling, shaking his hands.

"The ceremony will take place at once," said the priest, "in the village, in front of the statue of Thangookari."

Immediately they started back, the priest leading. Hadwell and his bride were in the center now. Mele still had not spoken since the ceremony.

Silently they crossed the swaying bridge of vines. Once across, the villagers pressed more closely around Hadwell than before, giving him a slightly claustrophobic feeling. If he had not been convinced of their essential goodness, he told himself, he might have felt genuinely apprehensive.

Ahead lay the village and the altar of Thangookari. The priest hurried toward it.

Suddenly there was a shriek. Everyone turned and rushed back to the bridge.

At the brink of the river, Hadwell saw what had happened. Kataga, Mele's father, had brought up the rear of the procession. As he had reached the midpoint, the central supporting vine had inexplicably snapped. Kataga had managed to clutch a secondary vine, but only for a moment. While the villagers watched, his hold weakened, released, and he

dropped into the river.

Hadwell stared, frozen into shock. With dreamlike clarity, he saw it all—Kataga falling, a smile of magnificent courage on his face, the raging white water, the jagged rocks below.

It was a certain, terrible death.

"Can he swim?" Hadwell asked Mele.

"No," the girl said. "He refused to learn. . . Oh, Father! How could you!"

The raging white water frightened Hadwell more than anything he had ever seen, more than the emptiness of space. But the father of his wife was in danger.

He plunged headlong into the icy water.

Kataga was almost unconscious when Hadwell reached him, which was fortunate, for the Igathian did not struggle when Hadwell seized him by the hair and started to swim vigorously for the nearest shore. But he couldn't make it. Currents swept the men along, pulling them under and throwing them to the surface again. By a strenuous effort, Hadwell was able to avoid the first rocks. But more loomed ahead.

The villagers ran along the bank, yelling at him.

With his strength ebbing rapidly, Hadwell fought again for the shore. A submerged rock scraped his side and his grip on Kataga's hair began to weaken.

The Igathian was starting to recover and struggle.

"Don't give up, old man," Hadwell gasped. The bank sped past. Hadwell came within ten feet of it, but then the current began to carry him out again.

With his last surge of strength, he managed to grab an overhead branch and hold on while the current wrenched and tore at his body. Moments later, guided by the priest, the villagers pulled Hadwell and Kataga in to the safety of the shore.

BOTH men were carried to the village. When Hadwell was able to breathe normally again, he turned and grinned feebly at Kataga.

"Close call, old man," he said.

"Meddler!" Kataga spat at Hadwell and stalked off.

Hadwell gaped after him. "Must have affected his brain," he said. "Well, shall we get on with the Ultimate?"

The villagers drew close to him, their faces menacing.

"Hah! The Ultimate he wants!"

"A man like that!"

"After dragging poor Kataga out of the river, he has the nerve to. . ."

"His own father-in-law and he saves his life!"

"A man like that doesn't deserve the Ultimate!"

"A man like that," Vassi the

merchant summed up, "doesn't deserve to die!"

Hadwell wondered if they had all gone temporarily insane. He stood up a bit shakily and appealed to the priest. "What is all this?"

Lag, with mournful eyes and pale, set lips, looked at him and did not answer.

"Can't I have the Ultimate ceremony?" Hadwell asked, with a plaintive note in his voice.

"You *do* deserve it," the priest said. "If any man has ever deserved the Ultimate, you do, Hadwell. I feel you should have it, as a matter of abstract justice. But there is more involved here than abstract justice. There are principles of mercy and human pity which are dear to Thangookari. By these principles, Hadwell, you did a terrible and inhuman thing when you rescued poor Kataga from the river. I am afraid the action is unforgivable."

Hadwell didn't know what to say. Apparently there was some taboo against rescuing men who had fallen into the river. But how could they expect him to know about it? How could they let this one little thing outweigh all he had done for them?

"Isn't there *some* ceremony you can give me?" he pleaded. "I like you people. I want to live here. Surely there's *something* you can do."

The old priest's eyes misted with compassion. He gripped his mace, started to lift it.

He was stopped by an ominous roar from the crowd.

"There is nothing I can do," he said. "Leave us, false emissary. Leave us, Hadwell—who does not deserve to die."

"All right!" Hadwell shouted, his temper suddenly snapping. "To hell with you bunch of dirty savages. I wouldn't stay here if you got down on your knees and begged me. I'm going. Are you with me, Mele?"

The girl blinked convulsively, looked at Hadwell, then at the priest. There was a long moment of silence. Then the priest murmured, "Remember your father, Mele. Remember the beliefs of your people."

Mele's proud little chin came up. "I know where my duty lies. Let's go, Richard dear."

"Right," said Hadwell. He stalked off to his spaceship, followed by Mele.

In despair, the old priest watched. He cried, "Mele!" once, in a heart-broken voice. But Mele did not turn back. He saw her enter the ship and the port slide shut.

Within minutes, red and blue flames bathed the silver sphere. The sphere lifted, gained speed, dwindled to a speck, and vanished.

Tears rolled down the old priest's cheeks as he watched it go.

HOURS later, Hadwell said, "Darling, I'm taking you to Earth, the planet I come from. You'll like it there."

"I know I will," Mele murmured, staring out a porthole at the brilliant stars.

Somewhere among them was her world, lost to her forever. She was homesick already. But there had been no other choice. A woman who loves truly and well never loses faith in her man.

She fingered a tiny sheathed dagger concealed in her clothing. The dagger was tipped with a peculiarly painful and slow-acting poison. It was a family heirloom, to be used when there was no priest around, and only on those one loved most dearly.

"I'm through wasting my time," Hadwell said. "With your help, I'm going to do great things. You'll be proud of me, honey."

Mele knew he meant it. Someday, she thought, Hadwell would atone for the sin against her father. He would do something, some fine deed, perhaps today, perhaps tomorrow, perhaps next year. And then she would give him the most precious thing a woman can give to a man.

A painful death.

—ROBERT SHECKLEY

THE COFFIN CURE

By ALAN E. NOURSE

*Help one's fellow-man for fun
and profit? Oh, yes—but look
out for the final accounting!*

WHEN the discovery was announced, it was Dr. Chauncey Patrick Coffin who announced it. He had, of course, arranged with uncanny skill to take most of the credit for himself. If it turned out to be even greater than he had hoped, so much the better. His presentation was scheduled for the final night of the American College of Clinical Practitioners' annual

meeting, and Coffin had fully intended it to be a bombshell.

It was. Its explosion exceeded even Dr. Coffin's wilder expectations, which took quite a bit of doing. In the end, he had waded through more newspaper reporters than medical doctors as he left the hall that night. It was a heady evening for Chauncey Patrick Coffin, M.D.

Certain others were not so de-

Illustrated by KIRBERGER

lighted with Coffin's bombshell.

"It's idiocy!" young Dr. Phillip Dawson all but howled in the laboratory conference room the next morning. "Blind, screaming idiocy! You've gone out of your mind — that's all there is to it. Can't you see what you've done? Aside from selling your colleagues down the river, that is?"

HE CLENCHED the reprint of Coffin's address in his hand and brandished it like a broadsword. "Report on a Vaccine for the Treatment and Cure of the Common Cold," by C. P. Coffin, *et al.* That's what it says — *et al.* My idea in the first place, Jake and I pounding our heads on the wall for eight solid months — and now you go sneak it into publication a full year before we have any business publishing a word about it —"

"Really, Phillip!" Dr. Chauncey Coffin ran a pudgy hand through his snowy hair. "How ungrateful! I thought for sure you'd be delighted. An excellent presentation, I must say — terse, succinct, unequivocal —" he raised his hand — "but *generously* unequivocal, you understand. You should have heard the ovation — they nearly went wild! And the look on Underwood's face! Worth waiting twenty years for. . ."

"And the reporters," snapped Phillip. "Don't forget the report-

ers." He whirled on the small dark man sitting quietly in the corner. "How about that, Jake? Did you see the morning papers? This thief not only steals our work, he splashes it all over the countryside in red ink."

Dr. Jacob Miles coughed apologetically. "What Phillip is so stormed up about is the prematurity of it all," he said to Coffin. "After all, we've hardly had an acceptable period of clinical trial."

"Nonsense," said Coffin, glaring at Phillip. "Underwood and his men were ready to publish their discovery within another six weeks. Where would we be then? How much clinical testing do you want? Phillip, you had the worst cold of your life when you took the vaccine. Have you had any since?"

"No, of course not," said Phillip peevishly.

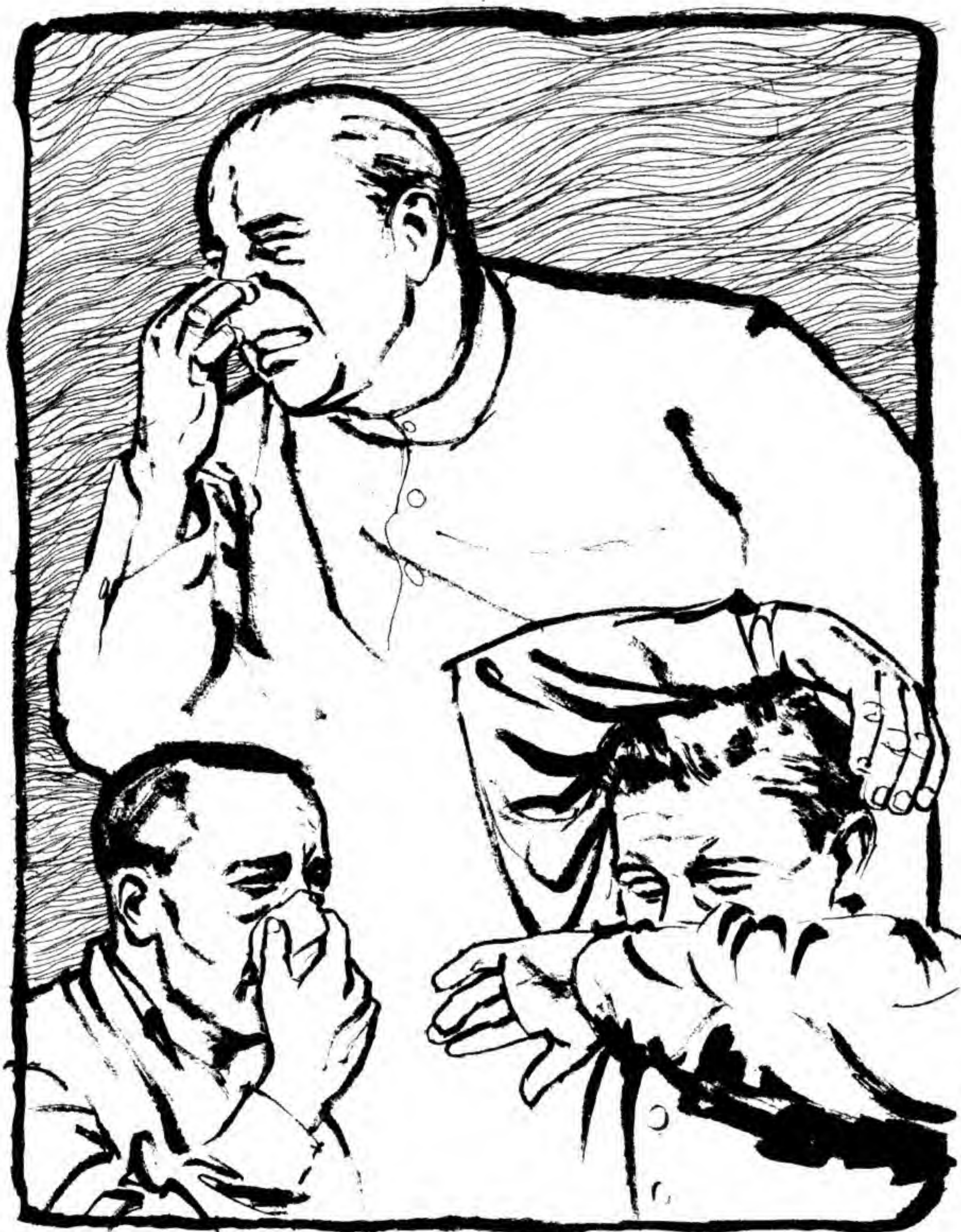
"Jacob, how about you? Any sniffles?"

"Oh, no. No colds."

"Well, what about those six hundred students from the University? Did I misread the reports on them?"

"No — 98% cured of active symptoms within twenty-four hours. Not a single recurrence. The results were just short of miraculous." Jake hesitated. "Of course, it's only been a month. . ."

"Month, year, century! Look at them! Six hundred of the world's



most luxuriant colds and now not even a sniffle." The chubby doctor sank down behind the desk, his ruddy face beaming. "Come now, gentlemen, be reasonable. Think positively! There's work to be done, a great deal of work. They'll be wanting me in Washington. Press conference in twenty minutes. Drug houses to consult with. How dare we stand in the path of Progress? We've won the greatest medical triumph of all times — the conquering of the Common Cold. We'll go down in history!"

And he was perfectly right on one point, at least.

They did go down in history.

THE public response to the vaccine was little less than mass-scale. Of all the ailments that have tormented mankind throughout history, none was ever more universal, more tenacious, more uniformly miserable than the common cold.

It respected no barriers, boundaries, or classes; ambassadors and chambermaids snuffled and sneezed in drippy-nosed unanimity. The powers in the Kremlin sniffed and blew and wept genuine tears on drafty days, while Senatorial debates on Earth-shaking issues paused reverently upon the blowing of a nose, the clearing of a rhinorrheic throat. True, other illnesses brought disability, even death in their wake, but the

common cold brought torment to the millions, as it implacably resisted the most superhuman of efforts to curb it.

Until that rainy November day when the tidings broke to the world in four-inch banner heads:

COFFIN NAILS LID ON COMMON COLD!

"No More Coughin' "

States Co-Finder of Cure

**SNIFFLES SNIPED; SINGLE SHOT TO SAVE
SNEEZERS**

In medical circles, it was called the Coffin Multicentric Upper Respiratory Virus-inhibiting Vaccine, but the newspapers could never stand for such high-sounding names and called it, instead, "The Coffin Cure."

Below the banner heads, world-renowned feature writers expounded in awesome terms the story of the leviathan struggle of Dr. Chauncey Patrick Coffin (*et al.*) in solving this riddle of the ages:

How, after years of failure, they ultimately succeeded in culturing the true causative agent of the common cold, identifying it not as a single virus or even a group of viruses, but rather as a multicentric virus complex invading the soft mucous linings of the nose, throat and eyes, capable of alter-

ing its basic molecular structure at any time to resist efforts of the body from within, or the physician from without, to attack and dispel it; how the hypothesis was set forth by Dr. Phillip Dawson that the virus could be destroyed only by an antibody which could "freeze" the virus-complex in one form long enough for normal body defenses to dispose of the offending invader; the exhausting search for such a "crippling agent" and the final crowning success, after injecting untold gallons of cold-virus material into the hides of a group of cooperative dogs (a species which had never suffered from colds and hence endured the whole business with an air of affectionate boredom).

And, finally, the testing. First, Coffin himself (who was suffering a particularly horrendous case of the affliction he sought to cure); then his assistants, Phillip Dawson and Jacob Miles; then a multitude of students from the University — carefully selected for the severity of their symptoms, the longevity of their colds, their tendency to acquire them on little or no provocation, and their utter inability to get rid of them with any known medical program.

They were a sorry spectacle, those students filing through the Coffin laboratory for three days in October: wheezing like steam shovels, snorting and sneezing and

sniffing and blowing, coughing and squeaking, mute appeals glowing in their bloodshot eyes. The researchers dispensed the material — a single shot in the right arm, a sensitivity control in the left.

WITH growing delight, they then watched as the results came in. The sneezing stopped; the sniffing ceased. A great silence settled over the campus, in the classrooms, in the library, in classic halls. Dr. Coffin's voice returned (rather to the regret of his co-workers) and he began bouncing about the laboratory like a small boy at the fair. Students by the dozen trooped in for checkups with noses dry and eyes bright.

In a matter of days, there was no doubt left that the goal had been reached.

"But we have to be sure," Phillip Dawson had said emphatically. "This was only the pilot test. We need mass testing now on an entire community. We ought to go to the West Coast to run studies—they have a different breed of cold out there, I hear. We'll have to see how long the immunity lasts, make sure there are no unexpected side effects. . ." And, muttering to himself, he fell to work with pad and pencil, calculating the program to be undertaken before publication.

But there were rumors. Underwood at Stanford, it was said, had already completed his tests and was preparing a paper for publication in a matter of months. Surely, with such dramatic results on the pilot tests, *something* could be put into print. It would be tragic to lose the race for the sake of a little unnecessary caution. . .

Phillip Dawson, though adamant, was a voice crying in the wilderness, for Chauncey Coffin was boss.

Within a week, though, even Coffin was wondering if he had bitten off just a trifle too much. They had expected that the demand for the vaccine would be great — but even the grisly memory of the early days of the Salk vaccine had not prepared them for the mobs of sneezing, wheezing, red-eyed people bombarding them for the first fruits.

Clear-eyed young men from the Government Bureau pushed through crowds of local townspeople, lining the streets outside the Coffin laboratory, standing in pouring rain to raise insistent placards.

Seventeen pharmaceutical houses descended with production plans, cost estimates, colorful graphs demonstrating proposed yield and distribution programs.

Coffin was flown to Washington, where conferences labored far into the night as demands

pounded their doors like a tidal wave.

One laboratory promised the vaccine in ten days; another guaranteed it in a week. The first actually appeared in three weeks and two days, to be soaked up in the space of three hours by the thirsty sponge of cold-weary humanity. Express planes were dispatched to Europe, to Asia, to Africa with the precious cargo, a million needles pierced a million hides, and with a huge, convulsive sneeze, mankind stepped forth into a new era.

THERE were abstainers, of course — there always are:

"It doesd't bake eddy differets how buch you talk," Ellie Dawson cried hoarsely, shaking her blonde curls. "I dod't wadt eddy cold shots."

"You're being totally unreasonable," Phillip said, glowering at his wife in annoyance. She wasn't the sweet young thing he had married, not this evening. Her eyes were puffy, her nose red and sore. "You've had this cold for two solid months now and there just isn't any sense to it. It's making you miserable. You can't eat, you can't breathe, you can't sleep —"

"I dod't wadt eddy cold shots," she repeated stubbornly.

"But why not? Just one little needle. You'd hardly feel it —"

"But I dod't like deedles!" she cried, bursting into tears. "Why dod't you leave be alode? Go take your dasty old deedles ad stick theb id people that wadt theb."

"Aw, Ellie —"

"I dod't care, *I dod't like deedles!*" she wailed, burying her face in his shirt.

He held her close, kissing her ear and making comforting little noises. It was no use, he reflected sadly. Science just wasn't Ellie's long suit; she didn't know a cold vaccine from a case of smallpox, and no appeal to logic or common sense could surmount her irrational fear of hypodermics. "All right, sweet, nobody's going to make you do anything you don't want to."

"Ad eddyway, thik of the poor tissue badufacturers," she sniffled, wiping her nose with a pink facial tissue. "All their little childred starvig to death —"

"Say, you *have* got a cold," said Phillip, sniffing. "You're wearing enough perfume to fell an ox." He wiped away her tears and grinned at her. "Come on now, fix your face. Dinner at the Driftwood? I hear they have marvelous lamb chops."

It was a mellow evening. The lamb chops were delectable — far the best he had ever eaten, he thought, even with as good a cook as Ellie for a spouse. Ellie dripped and blew continuously, but re-

fused to go home until they had taken in a movie and stopped by to dance a while.

"I hardly ever gedt to see you eddy bore," she wistfully explained. "All because of that dasty bedicide you're givig people."

It was true, of course. The work at the lab was endless. They danced, but came home early nevertheless. Phillip needed all the sleep he could get.

He awoke once during the night to a parade of sneezes from his wife, and rolled over, frowning sleepily to himself. It was ignominious, in a way — the wife of one of the cold-cure discoverers refusing the fruit of all those months of work.

And cold or no cold, she surely was using a whale of a lot of perfume.

HE AWOKE suddenly, began to stretch, and sat bolt upright in bed, looking wildly about the room. Pale morning sunlight drifted in the window. Downstairs, he heard Ellie stirring in the kitchen.

For a moment, he thought he was suffocating. He leaped out of bed, stared at the vanity table across the room. "*Somebody's spilled the whole damned bottle —*"

The heavy sick-sweet miasma hung like a cloud around him, drenching the room. With every

breath, it grew thicker. He searched the vanity top frantically, but there were no open bottles.

His head began to spin from the emetic effluvium.

He blinked in confusion, his hand trembling as he lit a cigarette. No need to panic, he thought. She probably knocked a bottle over when she was dressing. He took a deep puff — and burst into a paroxysm of coughing as acrid fumes burned down his throat to his lungs.

"Ellie!" He rushed into the hall, still coughing. The match smell had given way to a caustic stench of burning weeds. He stared at his cigarette in horror and threw it into the sink. The odor grew worse. He threw open the hall closet, expecting smoke to come billowing out.

"Ellie! Somebody's burning down the house!"

"Whadtever are you talkig about?" Ellie's voice came from the stair well. "It's just the toast I burned, silly."

He rushed down the stairs two at a time — and nearly gagged as he reached the bottom. The smell of hot, rancid grease struck him like a solid wall. It was intermingled with an overpowering oily smell of boiled and parboiled coffee. By the time he reached the kitchen, he was holding his nose, tears pouring from his eyes.

"*Ellie, what are you doing in here?*"

She stared at him. "I'b baking breakfast."

"But don't you *smell* it?"

On the stove, the automatic percolator made small, promising noises. Four sunnyside eggs were sizzling in the frying pan; half a dozen strips of bacon drained on a paper towel on the sideboard. It couldn't have looked more innocent.

Cautiously, Phillip released his nose, sniffed. The stench nearly strangled him. "You mean you don't smell anything *strange*?"

"I dod't sbell eddythig, period," said Ellie defensively.

"The coffee, the bacon — come here a minute!"

She reeked — of bacon, of coffee, of burned toast, but mostly of perfume.

"Did you put on fresh perfume this morning?"

"Before breakfast? Dod't be ridiculous."

"Not even a drop?" Phillip was turning very white.

"Dot a drop."

PHILLIP shook his head. "Now wait a minute. This must be all in my mind. I'm — just imagining things, that's all. Working too hard, hysterical reaction. In a minute, it'll all go away." He poured a cup of coffee, added cream and sugar.

He couldn't get it close enough to taste it. It smelled as if it had been boiling three weeks in a rancid pot. It was the smell of coffee, all right, but a smell that was fiendishly distorted, overpoweringly and nauseatingly magnified. It pervaded the room and burned his throat and brought tears gushing to his eyes.

Slowly, realization began to dawn. He spilled the coffee as he set the cup down. The perfume. The coffee. The cigarette. . .

"My hat," he choked. "Get me my hat. I've got to get to the laboratory."

It grew worse all the way downtown. He fought down nausea as the smell of damp, rotting earth rose from his front yard in a gray cloud. The neighbor's dog dashed out to greet him, exuding the great-grandfather of all dog odors. While Phillip waited for the bus, every passing car fouled the air with noxious fumes, gagging him, doubling him up with coughing as he dabbed at his streaming eyes.

Nobody else seemed to notice anything wrong at all.

The bus ride was a nightmare. It was a damp, rainy day; the inside of the bus smelled like the locker room after a big game. A bleary-eyed man with three-days' stubble on his chin flopped down in the seat next to him, and Phillip reeled back in memory to the

job he had held in his student days, cleaning vats in the brewery.

"It'sh a great morning," Bleary-eyes breathed at him. "Huh, Doc?"

Phillip blanched. To top it, the man had had a breakfast of salami. In the seat ahead, a fat gentleman held a dead cigar clamped in his mouth like a rank growth. Phillip's stomach began rolling; he sank his face into his hand, trying unobtrusively to clamp his nostrils. With a groan of deliverance, he lurched off the bus at the laboratory gate.

He met Jake Miles coming up the steps. Jake looked pale, too pale.

"Morning," Phillip said weakly. "Nice day. Looks like the Sun might come through."

"Yeah," said Jake. "Nice day. You — uh — feel all right this morning?"

"FINE, fine." Phillip tossed his hat in the closet, opened the incubator on his culture tubes, trying to look busy. He slammed the door after one whiff and gripped the edge of the work table with whitening knuckles. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing. Thought you looked a little peaked, was all."

They stared at each other in silence. Then, as though by signal, their eyes turned to the office at the end of the lab.

"Coffin come in yet?"

Jake nodded. "He's in there. He's got the door locked."

"I think he's going to have to open it," said Phillip.

A gray-faced Dr. Coffin unlocked the door, backed quickly toward the wall. The room reeked of kitchen deodorant.

"Stay right where you are," Coffin squeaked. "Don't come a step closer. I can't see you now. I'm — I'm busy. I've got work that has to be done —"

"You're telling me," growled Phillip. He motioned Jake into the office and locked the door again carefully. Then he turned to Coffin. "When did it start for you?"

Coffin was trembling. "Right after supper last night. I thought I was going to suffocate. Got up and walked the streets all night. My God, what a stink!"

"Jake?"

Dr. Miles shook his head. "Sometime this morning. I woke up with it."

"That's when it hit me," said Phillip.

"But I don't understand," Coffin howled. "Nobody else seems to notice anything —"

"Yet," Phillip said. "We were the first three to take the Coffin Cure, remember? You and me and Jake. Two months ago."

Coffin's forehead was beaded with sweat. He stared at the two men in growing horror.

"*But what about the others?*"

"I think," said Phillip, "that we'd better find something spectacular to do in a mighty big hurry. That's what I think."

JAKE MILES said, "The most important thing right now is secrecy. We mustn't let a word get out — not until we're absolutely certain."

"But what's *happened?*" Coffin cried. "These foul smells everywhere. You, Phillip — you had a cigarette this morning. I can smell it clear over here and it's burning my eyes. If I didn't know better, I'd swear neither of you had had a bath in a week. Every odor in town has suddenly turned foul —"

"*Magnified*, you mean," said Jake. "Perfume still smells sweet — there's just too much of it. The same with cinnamon; I tried it. Cried for half an hour, but it still smelled like cinnamon. No, I don't think the *smells* have changed any."

"But what then?"

"Our noses have changed, obviously." Jake paced the floor in excitement. "Look at our dogs. They've never had colds — and they practically live by their noses. Other animals — all dependent on their senses of smell for survival — and none of them ever have anything even vaguely reminiscent of a common cold. The multicentric virus hits primates

only — and it reaches its fullest parasitic powers in *Man alone!*”

Coffin shook his head miserably. “But why this horrible reek all of a sudden? I haven’t had a cold in weeks —”

“Of course not! That’s just what I’m saying,” Jake persisted. “Look, why do we have any sense of smell at all? Because we have tiny olfactory nerve endings buried in the mucous membrane of our noses and throats. But we’ve always had the virus living there, too, colds or no colds, throughout our entire lifetime. It’s *always* been there, anchored in the same cells, parasitizing the same sensitive tissues that carry our olfactory nerve endings, numbing them and crippling them, making them practically useless as sensory organs. No wonder we never smelled anything before! Those poor little nerve endings never had a chance!”

“Until we came along and destroyed the virus,” said Phillip.

“Oh, we didn’t destroy it. We merely stripped it of a very slippery protective mechanism it had against normal body defenses.” Jake perched on the edge of the desk, his dark face intense. “These two months since we had our shots have witnessed a battle to the death between our bodies and the virus. With the help of the vaccine, our bodies have won, that’s all — stripped away the last

strongholds of an invader that has been almost a part of our normal physiology since the beginning of primates. And now, for the first time, those crippled little nerve endings are just beginning to function.”

COFFIN groaned. “God help us. You think it’ll get worse?”

“And worse. And still worse,” said Jake.

“I wonder,” said Phillip slowly, “what the anthropologists will say.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe it was just a single mutation somewhere back in pre-history. Just a tiny change of metabolism that left one line of the primates vulnerable to an invader no other would harbor. Why else should Man have begun to flower and blossom intellectually — grow to depend so much on his brains instead of his brawn that he could rise above all others? What better reason than because, somewhere along the line, *he suddenly lost his sense of smell?*”

“Well, he’s got it back again now,” Coffin said despairingly, “and he’s not going to like it a bit.”

“No, he surely isn’t,” Jake agreed. “He’s going to start hunting very quickly for someone to blame, I think.”

They both looked at Coffin.

“Now don’t be ridiculous, boys,”

said Coffin, beginning to shake. "We're in this together. Phillip, it was your idea in the first place — you said so yourself! You can't leave me now —"

The telephone jangled. The frightened voice of the secretary bleated, "Dr. Coffin? There was a student on the line just a moment ago. He — he said he was coming up to see you. Now, he said, not later —"

"I'm busy," Coffin sputtered. "I can't see anyone. And I can't take any calls —"

"But he's already on his way up," the girl burst out. "He was saying something about tearing you apart with his bare hands."

Coffin slammed down the receiver. His face was the color of clay. "They'll crucify me! Jake — Phillip — you've got to help me!"

Phillip sighed and unlocked the door. "Send a girl down to the freezer and have her bring up all the live cold virus she can find. Get us some inoculated monkeys and a few dozen dogs." He turned to Coffin. "And stop sniveling. You're the big publicity man around here — you're going to handle the screaming masses, whether you like it or not."

"But what are you going to do?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Phillip, "but whatever I do is going to cost you your shirt. We're going to find out how to

catch cold again if we have to die trying."

IT WAS an admirable struggle, and a futile one. They sprayed their noses and throats with enough pure culture of virulent live virus to have condemned an ordinary man to a lifetime of sneezing, watery-eyed misery. They didn't develop a sniffle among them.

They mixed six different strains of virus and gargled the extract, spraying themselves and every inoculated monkey they could get their hands on with the vile-smelling stuff. Not a sneeze.

They injected it hypodermically, intradermally, subcutaneously, intramuscularly and intravenously. They drank it. They bathed in it.

But they didn't catch a cold.

"Maybe it's the wrong approach," Jake said one morning. "Our body defenses are keyed up to top performance right now. Maybe if we break them down, we can get somewhere."

They plunged down that alley with grim abandon. They starved themselves. They forced themselves to stay awake for days on end, until exhaustion forced their eyes closed in spite of all they could do. They carefully devised vitamin-free, protein-free, mineral-free diets that tasted like library paste and smelled worse.

They wore wet clothes and sopping shoes to work, turned off the heat and threw windows open to the raw winter air. Then they resprayed themselves with the live cold virus and waited prayerfully for the sneezing to begin.

It didn't. They stared at each other in gathering gloom. They'd never felt better in their lives.

Except for the smells, of course. They'd hoped that they might, presently, get used to them. They didn't. Every day it grew a little worse. They began smelling smells they never dreamed existed — noxious smells, cloying smells, smells that drove them gagging to the sinks. Their nose-plugs were rapidly losing their effectiveness. Mealtimes were nightmarish ordeals; they lost weight with alarming speed.

But they didn't catch cold.

"I think you should all be locked up," Ellie Dawson said severely as she dragged her husband, blue-faced and shivering, out of an icy shower one bitter morning. "You've lost your wits. You need to be protected against yourselves, that's what you need."

"You don't understand," Phillip moaned. "We've got to catch cold."

ELLIE snapped angrily, "Why? Suppose you don't — what's going to happen?"

"We had three hundred stu-

dents march on the laboratory today," Phillip explained patiently. "The smells were driving them crazy, they said. They couldn't even bear to be close to their best friends. They wanted something done about it, or else they wanted blood. Tomorrow we'll have them back and three hundred more. And they were just the pilot study! What's going to happen when fifteen million people find their noses suddenly turning on them?"

He shuddered. "Have you seen the papers? People are already going around sniffing like bloodhounds. And now we're finding out what a thorough job we did. We can't crack it, Ellie. We can't even get a toe hold. Those antibodies are just doing too good a job."

"Well, maybe you can find some unclebodies to take care of them," Ellie offered vaguely.

"Look, don't make bad jokes—"

"I'm not making jokes! I don't care *what* you do. All I want is a husband back who doesn't complain about how everything smells, and eats the dinners I cook, and doesn't stand around in cold showers at six in the morning."

"I know it's miserable," he said helplessly. "But I don't know how we can stop it."

He found Jake and Coffin in tight-lipped conference when he reached the lab.

"I can't do it any more," Coffin was saying. "I've begged them for time. I've promised them everything but my upper plate. I can't face them again. I just can't."

"We only have a few days left," Jake said grimly. "If we don't come up with something, we're goners."

Phillip's jaw suddenly sagged as he stared at them. "You know what I think?" he asked suddenly. "I think we've been prize idiots. We've gotten so rattled, we haven't used our heads. And all the time it's been sitting there blinking at us!"

"What are you talking about?" snapped Jake.

"Unclebodies," said Phillip.

"Great God!"

"No, I'm dead serious." Phillip's eyes were very bright. "How many of those students do you think you can corral to help us?"

Coffin gulped. "Six hundred. They're out there in the street right now, a blood-seeking mob howling for a lynching."

"All right, I want them in here. And I want some monkeys. Monkeys with colds—the worse colds, the better."

"Do you have any idea what you're doing?" asked Jake.

"None in the least," said Phillip happily, "except that it's never been done before. But maybe it's time we tried following our noses for a while —"

THE tidal wave began to break two days later . . . only a few people here, a dozen there, but enough to confirm the direst newspaper predictions. The boomerang was completing its circle.

At the laboratory, the doors were kept barred, the telephones disconnected. Within, there was a bustle of feverish — if odorous — activity. For the three researchers, the olfactory acuity had reached agonizing proportions. Even the small gas masks Phillip had devised could no longer shield them from the continuous barrage of violent odors.

But the work went on in spite of the smell. Truckloads of monkeys arrived at the lab — cold-ridden, sneezing, coughing, weeping, wheezing monkeys by the dozen. Culture trays bulged with tubes, overflowed the incubators and work tables. Each day six hundred angry students paraded through the lab, arms exposed, mouths open, grumbling but cooperating.

At the end of the first week, half the monkeys were cured of their colds and were unable to catch them back; the other half had new colds and couldn't get rid of them. Phillip observed this fact with grim satisfaction and went about the laboratory mumbling to himself.

Two days later, he burst forth jubilantly, lugging a sad-looking

puppy under his arm. It was like no other puppy in the world. This one was sneezing and snuffling with a perfect howler of a cold.

The day came when they injected a tiny droplet of milky fluid beneath the skin of Phillip's arm and got the virus spray and gave his nose and throat a liberal application. Then they sat back and waited.

They were still waiting three days later.

"It was a great idea," Jake said morosely, flipping a bulging notebook closed with finality. "It just didn't work, was all."

"Where's Coffin?"

"He collapsed three days ago. Nervous prostration. He kept having dreams about hangings."

Phillip sighed. "Well, I suppose we'd better just face it. Nice knowing you, Jake. Pity it had to be this way."

"It was a great try, old man. A great try."

"Ah, yes. Nothing like going down in a blaze of —"

Phillip stopped dead, his eyes widening. His nose began to twitch. He took a gasp, a larger gasp, as a long-dead reflex came sleepily to life, shook its head, reared back. . .

Phillip sneezed.

He sneezed for ten minutes without a pause, until he was blue-faced and gasping for air. He caught hold of Jake, wringing his

hand as tears gushed from his eyes.

"IT WAS a sible edough principle," he said later to Ellie as she spread mustard on his chest and poured more warm water into his foot bath. "The Cure itself depedded upod it—the adtigated-adtibody reactiod. We had the adtibody agaidst the virus, all ridght; what we had to find was sobe kide of adtibody agaidst the adtibody." He sneezed violently and poured in nose drops with a happy grin.

"Will they be able to make it fast enough?"

"Just aboutt fast edough for people to get good ad eager to catch cold agaid," said Phillip. "There's odly wud little hitch. . ."

Ellie Dawson took the steaks from the grill and set them, still sizzling, on the dinner table.

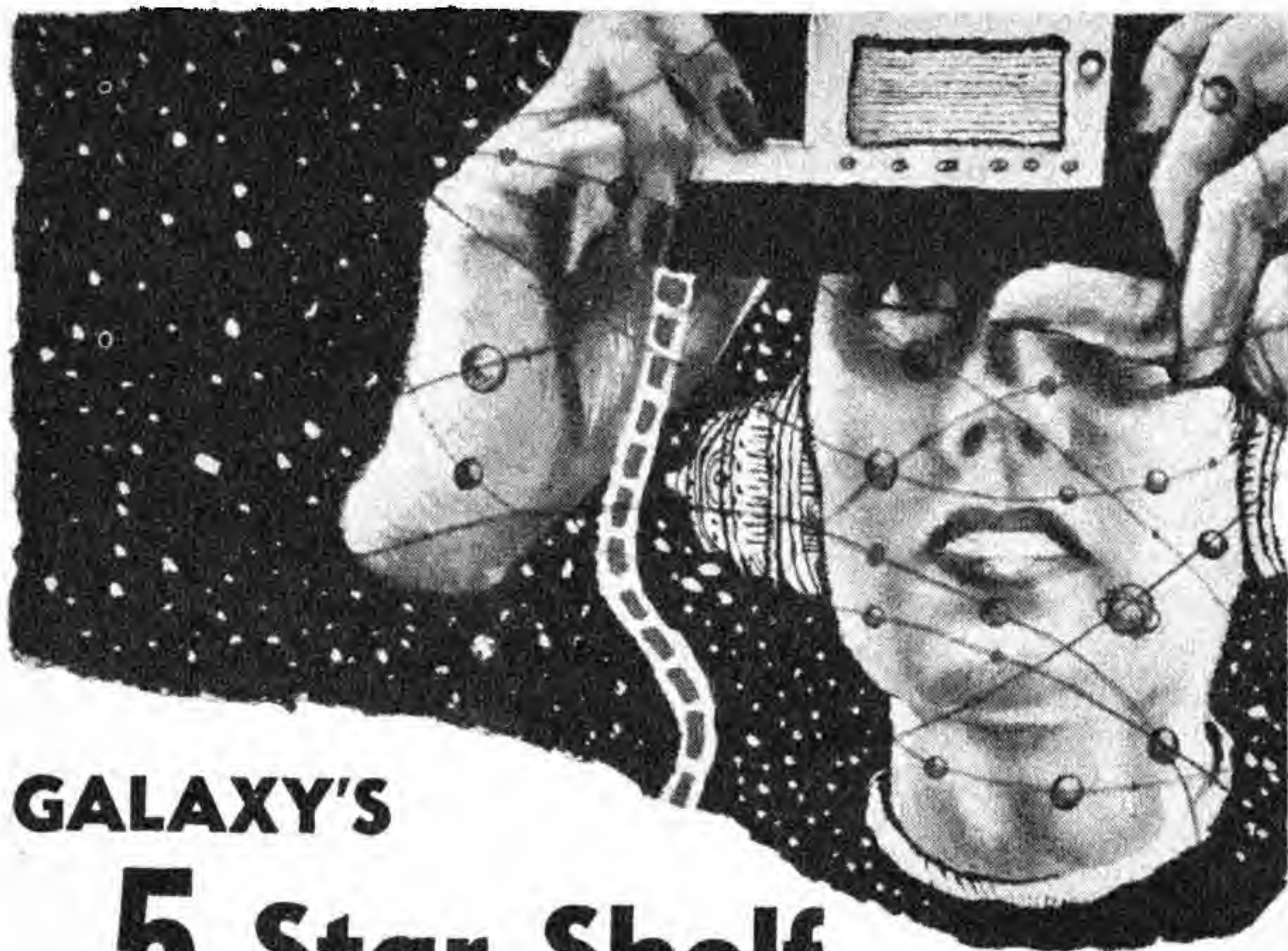
"Hitch?" she said.

Phillip nodded as he chewed the steak with a pretense of enthusiasm. It tasted like slightly damp K-ration.

"This stuff we've bade does a real good job. Just a little too good." He wiped his nose and reached for a fresh tissue.

"I bay be wrog, but I thik I've got this cold for keeps," he said sadly. "Udless I cad fide ad adtibody agaidst the adtibody agaidst the adtibody —"

—ALAN E. NOURSE



GALAXY'S

5 Star Shelf

THE BIG BALL OF WAX by
Shepherd Mead. Ballantine
Books, N. Y., \$2.00

BALLANTINE has done a large service by reissuing Mead's 1954 work of art. If you haven't yet read it, don't let it get away. *Gravy Planet*, *Preferred Risk* and *Golden Kazoo* told their yarns fairly straight; Mead coats his horror story with laughter.

Example: "I'm worried about Mabel." "Who's Mabel?" "She's the Muscular Dystrophy girl." "Can't she walk at all?" "She hasn't got it; it's her career, or

was. She's worked hard just to get somewhere in the organization. They've really sold the idea — endowment of billions, forty network hours *promised* each year —" "I know, it's a big operation." Some of the diseases are almost as big as General Motors. "All of a sudden — poof! Peptomycin! Makes M.D. no worse than a bad cold. Probably some scrubby little fellow in a laboratory."

A crisis has arisen in Mead's future world. Consumption has fallen sharply in St. Louis, apparently because of the activities of a religious sect, the Followers,

led by Molly Blood, a former strip artist. ConChem's trouble shooter, the narrator, takes over the local problem to find a solution.

Evidently the sect has an irresistible gimmick in XP, or feelies, in which the audience has full sensory participation. The hero's self-sacrificing first XP session is alone worth the cover price.

Nothing is sacred to Mead, give thanks, as he proceeds to make this one of the funniest books of the decade. I doubt if you'll even hold the disappointing Momsday Revolution against him.

EXPLORING MARS by Roy A. Gallant. Garden City Books, N. Y., \$2.00

BECAUSE of the close approach of Mars last September, it could only be expected that the market would be flooded by factual texts for the layman. The tide is now receding, leaving the following two items in its ebb.

Exploring Mars can claim the heavyweight title. The various publishing houses seem to have had an unofficial competition to see who could produce the unwieldiest volume. Until now, Albro Gaul's and the Ley-Braun entries have shared the crown. But not any more.

A full 12½ inches high by 9 wide, this new champ is fortunately redeemed by its maps and illustrations by Lowell Hess. Just make sure your youngster is at least as big as the book before you buy it.

THERE IS LIFE ON MARS by the Earl Nelson. The Citadel Press, N. Y., \$3.00

DESPITE the petulant title, Albert, the Earl Nelson, descendant of the famous Admiral, has written a scholarly summing-up that, though containing nothing new and startling, is quite readable. And fear not — the "life" referred to so dramatically is merely the moss and lichen of contemporary theory, not the intelligent life of Percival Lowell and H. G. Wells.

IN SEARCH OF WONDER by Damon Knight. Advent: Publishers, Chicago, \$4.00

A COLLECTION of critical essays devoted solely to the field of science-fantasy. Anthony Boucher, in his foreword, admires the hatchet job Knight does on Austin Hall, among others. That's no hatchet — it's an axe, swung by a man with more than his share of axes to grind, and used on a very early writer of science fiction for whom even a fly-swat-

ter would be a needlessly brutal weapon.

Boucher declares that all the rest of us are reviewers; Knight alone is a critic. True enough, the function of these pages is to point out worthy books and warn against duds. True, too, we can't afford the luxury of informing our readers how we would have written any item, including Knight's. Nor do we judge books in terms of authors' personal tastes and habits.

Then again, aren't we lucky that not every story is written in Knight's brilliantly metallic style, enjoyable and rewarding though it is?

If you want to add this to your collection of cutting weapons, order direct from Advent, 3508 N. Sheffield, Chicago.

THE RAPE OF THE MIND by Joost A. M. Meerloo, M.D. World Publishing Co., Cleveland and N. Y., \$5.00

THE Reichstag Trials in 1933 didn't raise too many questions because of the Nazis' choice of an idiot scapegoat, but the world was astounded by the spectacle of former heroes renouncing their ideology and confessing to treason in the Moscow Trials of the '30s.

The comparatively crude Nazi torture methods and the consid-

erably refined techniques evolved during the Korean War point up the new horrors of modern warfare, atrocities never covered by the Geneva Convention.

Dr. Meerloo underwent two and a half years of the Nazi occupation before he escaped to become Chief of the Psychological Dept. of the Netherlands Forces.

He has written a sobering book, but one with a message of hope for the budding science of the human mind.

MEN, MARTIANS AND MACHINES by Eric Frank Russell. Roy Publishers, N. Y., \$3.00

ROY, a new name in the field, starts well with the collection of the Jay Score series from *Astounding*. A good many of you will remember the original yarn with its sock ending. The volume also includes "Symbiotica," "Mechanistria" and "Mesmerica." Substantial space opera all, but badly anti-climactic after the impact of the first story.

Incidentally, I believe Russell's was the first author to include a built-in deus ex machina in his spaceship Table of Organization.

HOW TO MAKE AND USE A TELESCOPE by H. Percy Wilkins and Patrick Moore. W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., N. Y., \$2.95

THESE two gentlemen have been busy bees this year, responsible for the monumental *The Moon*, as well as Dr. Wilkins' solo *Moons, Rings and Crocodiles*.

I approached the present volume avidly, expecting the authors to pull a telescope out of the hat for me.

But it takes a good home workshop to be able to follow the authors' detailed instructions. Don't tackle this unless you're really well equipped. If you are — well, I envy you.

EXPLORING THE DEEP PACIFIC by Helen Raitt. W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., N. Y., \$3.75

A GOOD many authors are pretty glib about throwing women into the austere masculine environment of a spaceship. Mrs. Raitt's experiences make an excellent parallel, since, on a scientific expedition, weeks can go by between landings, during which time the ship is a world by itself — though Mrs. Raitt had nothing of the sort in mind, just a straight reportorial job on a woman in essentially a man's world. A refreshing view of a workhorse charting expedition.

RISK AND GAMBLING: THE STUDY OF SUBJECTIVE PROBABILITY by John Cohen and Mark Hansel. Philosophical Library, N. Y., \$3.50

IF THE layman reader isn't intimidated by numerous tables and charts, he is certain to find here some appetizing food for thought: "Predicting the Unknown," "Sampling the Universe," "Risk-taking," "The Language of Uncertainty."

The text does not concern efforts to influence, as per Dr. Rhine, but rather the reasoning processes of the human brain when confronted with uncertainties.

UFO AND THE BIBLE by M. K. Jessup. Citadel Press, N. Y., \$2.50

THE JACKET blurb says this book is likely to bring to an end the long conflict between the Bible and science. I doubt it. The battle still rages over present-day sightings, let alone Biblical reporting. Nevertheless, the book is perversely exciting. *Could* the Bible have been written as the result of a series of visitations?

— FLOYD C. GALE

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Army Without Banners

By EDWARD WELLEN

"War is hell" is half of the truth . . . it's hell on wheels!

Illustrated by DILLON

"**A** TRIM-a the dish," he said. He slid his eyes from the puddle mirages on the streaming concrete to the girl beside him in the open convertible. Again he wished he were a painter; in a few clean lines, one might abstract perfection.

"What?" Clean lines curved his way.

"A trim-a the dish. That's you. A trim dish. Play on words. 'To trim the dish' is to put a vessel on an even keel."

She smiled. "We're all-out nau-

tical today, I see."

He was about to say something about how good it would be to get out on the Sound again when a black mass with streaks of coral flashed abreast on the right, cut across his lane, outstripped the car obliquely ahead, cut sharply back, and continued in and out of the two lanes.

"That crazy idiot! You see that, Pauline? He nearly clipped me!" He was scandalized. His eyes hardened. "That guy needs a good lesson."

Pauline said nothing.

The steering wheel seemed to pulse as his grip tightened. He pressed the horn ring until the car ahead swung into the right-hand lane.

"Admiral Hornblower," Pauline said. She placed her left hand across his white knuckles. The diamond solitaire exploded miniature fireworks. "Let him go." Her hand withdrew.

He bore down on the gas pedal. The ends of his tie whipped out like pennants and the scarf covering her hair like a windsock. He fumed as cars gave way sluggishly under the goading of his horn. He knew he was spotting the black-and-coral car a growing lead by observing the rules its driver flouted.

PAULINE brought the fluttering ends of his tie down from his face and held them lightly against his chest. "Come on, Corbet. Chances are he has a reason to be in a rush."

He slowed. "Maybe." Anyway, the black-and-coral car was nowhere in sight.

"I'll get you a tie clip I saw. Shaped like an anchor. Promise you'll wear it?"

"Promise."

They passed the half moon of a service station. He saw the black-and-coral car gassing up. The driver was standing beside it with his hands locked behind his

head, yawning. *The creep had all the time in the world.* Pauline gave no sign that she had seen the car. Corbet smiled to himself. He kept flicking his eyes to the rear-view mirror.

In a few minutes, it showed black-and-coral zigzagging, expanding. Corbet pulled even with a car in the slow lane and held his speed down. The black-and-coral car was behind him now, giving him the horn. He paced the car alongside lovingly, effectively blocking the black-and-coral car.

He could feel Pauline's eyes on him. She said, "Someone wants to pass."

"Really?"

Pauline gazed at him a moment longer, then twisted to look back. "Oh." She faced forward again.

"Oh is right." The bleating became a high-pitched drone. He smiled. "*There's your Admiral Hornblower.*"

"This is childish." She drew away from him and sat stiffly.

He darted a look at her. The look went past her to the driver of the car alongside. The driver was staring at him curiously. Corbet flushed and concentrated on the road ahead. *Look, buddy, I'm showing a wise guy he doesn't own the road.*

A jolting impact from behind snapped Corbet and Pauline back against the seat. Corbet paled. He grimly held to his thwarting tac-

tic. Another jolt, harder. The devil was deliberately ramming them.

Pauline said, "Oh, let him pass."

"No," he said angrily.

The jolts came with the monotony of a drumbeat, hard but not hard enough to lock bumpers. In spite of himself, Corbet began to grin foolishly. It was childish. He wondered how he could end it gracefully. On cue, the car alongside turned off into a side road.

The black-and-coral car swung into the space and matched Corbet's speed. Dark eyes in a pasty face turned toward them. The eyes moved from Corbet to Pauline and locked.

"Hello, baby," the driver said in a shrill, excited voice.

He accelerated. A twist of the wheel cut his car at theirs.

CORBET'S foot kicked in desperate reflex from gas to brake and his hands wrenched the wheel. The black-and-coral car surged away. High laughing drifted back. Corbet's foot trod from brake to gas.

Banners of a punitive expedition, his tie ends fluttered against his face. His lips moved, urging the car on. Pauline looked up to heaven, then closed her eyes, her mouth curved in a bitter smile.

They were coming to the crossing where he had to make a right turn to reach the marina where they docked their cabin cruiser.

He hesitated the splith of a second, then kept straight on after the black-and-coral car.

The wheels spun a sticky sound; the state's responsibility had ended and a tar-surfaced stretch began. Childish thoughts were the order of the day? All right, then — he stole a glance at an abstracted Pauline — the road was licorice, the traffic lights cherry, lemon and lime drops.

Ahead, lemon drops dirtied as if they had fallen and rolled into a coating of dust, and cherry drops gleamed moistly. Gloating, Corbet saw the black-and-coral car first in line under the nearest light. He stopped, bumper to bumper with the car in front, pulled on the hand brake and sprang out.

He ran along the shoulder. It was only thirty yards, but he was afraid the light would change before he got there. At thirty-nine, he was becoming more easily winded. He had a big frame — not that he was fat. Portly was the word. He could still punt a football a good distance and swing a mean bat.

The smell of burned rubber diffused in his lungs. He made it. He felt like a tom-tom. He loomed threateningly over the driver.

A frightened smile was frozen on the wooden face of the driver. Behind the carved mask, the eyes

jerked up and away. It gave Corbet an uncanny feeling. Life was where it didn't belong, as if the eyes of a trophy head followed you, or as if you tore open a doll and shining viscera spilled out. The man was clearly scared, but fear excited him and kept him from shrinking away from Corbet. The eyes looked out almost eagerly.

Corbet wished Pauline could hear the mature, civilized way he was going to handle this. "This is a citizen's arrest. I'm a lawyer, so I know it's legal. I'm arresting you for reckless driving and taking you before the local magistrate. Let me see your license."

It was just as well Pauline couldn't hear. His breathing was too ragged. It would sound better when he told her later. The driver settled his eyes for a moment on Corbet's tie.

"Come on," Corbet said testily, "let me see your operator's license."

OUT of the tail of an eye, Corbet saw the lemon drop glisten as if washed off. A horn blew. The driver reached out suddenly and seized Corbet's tie. He jumped the light, pulling Corbet along.

Corbet trotted awkwardly, clawing at the tie with mounting panic, his eyes rolling up to the hot glare of the Sun as the

driver's fingers remained leeches to the tie and the car picked up speed.

With a suddenness that sent him tripping over his own feet, he slipped free. He stumbled a few steps, then stopped and stood a moment, limp, sweat-logged, rejoicing in gulplings of gas-fumed air. A shrouding blur stung his eyes and he wiped them. His chest heaved in a vast ballooning of anger. He turned and ran back to his car, his heart knocking, his feet splatting bubbling tar of chewable consistency.

Horns were sounding mad playground shrieks as traffic piled up behind his car. He deafened himself to the horn-blowing and to the howling of the livid-faced driver jammed immediately in back.

Pauline held the door open for him. He leaped in and slammed the door.

"That tops everything," she said flatly. Then a shading of concern rounded her voice. "You all right?"

He nodded shortly, getting the car underway with a jerk.

"You might've been killed," she said flatly again. Pitch of voice ineffably grave, she interpreted his grim silence and the avenging flutter of chartreuse and claret. "Oh, no! Not again!" Clean lines curved away from him.

He hunted the black-and-coral



car down, cutting in and out recklessly, gaining, burning for chance to reappear. Cherry drops glistened and he saw his prey stop, boxed in.

He loomed above the driver. Anger strangling his voice, he said, "Out! Make it fast or I'll haul you out!"

Something manipulated the driver's head now in a wide arc. The eyes behind the frightened smile weren't black but a dark dark-blue. They shone excitedly.

Corbet unlocked a fist to grab the door handle. Horns blew, gears clashed, a kaleidoscope spilled its fragments over the crossing.

Again the man reached out and seized Corbet's tie. Again the car leaped forward. And again Corbet was trotting awkwardly, clawing at his tie with mounting panic, his eyes rolling up to the white glare of the Sun as the driver's fingers remained leeches to the tie and the car picked up speed.

THE spaceship, invisibly wrapped in light, hung high above the delicate embroidery of lanes and cloverleaf. Inside the spaceship, in the sick bay, the two medical officers gazed impersonally at the figure standing stiffly before them, his eyeless pasty mask hanging from his belt like one of those grisly trophies that the aborigines of this conti-

nent learned from their conquerors to value, the dark dark-blue eyes in his real face staring blankly ahead.

The medical officers talked about him as if he weren't standing squarely before them. And, in a sense, he wasn't — they had switched off his mind.

The medic with the more body cilia said, "No doubt about it. Combat fatigue. Only natural, considering the number of missions he's been on."

The medic with the brighter ears flapped them in agreement. "I think we must recommend that every agent come in sooner for the thorough check-up. He's a perfect case of what can happen when we let it go too long. Have you seen the films?"

"No."

"Well, the camera that was on him while he was in action shows beyond question that, if he hadn't lost control of himself, there were several times when he could have caused beautiful pile-ups, with numerous casualties. But he forgot the object is to set up collisions and let *them* do the rest. He disobeyed the order not to engage the enemy in situations where there's a chance of being caught and discovered. Our side had to spirit him away under the very noses of their police."

Cilia vibrated in horror. Anxiously, "Why do it this way? It's

so damnably hard on our warriors!"

Compassionately, "What would you suggest?"

"Outright invasion! Get it over with in a hurry, one way or the other, instead of a little at a time for year after year!"

"Logistics is the answer. We can't raise a fleet that big and transport as many warriors as we'd need or supply them over so great a distance."

"But we'd win even with a smaller fleet and fewer warriors!"

Amusedly, "No doubt, but why gamble when it isn't necessary? And it isn't a little at a time."

Doubtful, but wanting to believe, "It isn't?"

"No. This is the most powerful country on the planet and yet, since the invention of the internal-combustion engine, accidents

have taken more lives than all its wars combined. And the rate is steadily increasing. With our help, of course, plus their growing productivity. When the figures are large enough — *that's* the time for outright invasion. And logistics won't be a problem then."

Ears flapped agreement. "Very sound plan. We'll have the resources of the most powerful country as a supply base. Very sound."

"Naturally. Meanwhile, we have a job to do." He gave his full attention to the figure standing stiffly before them.

The other did the same. With sudden enthusiasm, "Just a bit of gland work and we'll have him back in there in no time — and carrying out his missions according to orders!"

— EDWARD WELLEN

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(Continued from page 2)

had to decamp, bearing overcome passengers and staff with them, and the CAB ordered all incoming planes to land elsewhere.

A jet Convex, flying deadhead because of motor trouble, had to make a forced landing in the New Jersey marshes. The crew escaped, but the craft burned, eliminating the need for mosquito control in that area during the rest of the summer.

"Unfortunate," declared the local Pest Comptroller, "but it's an ill lack of wind that doesn't blow somebody some good."

At 7:58 A.M., the *S.S. Masonic* hooted deafeningly for her berthing tugs. Surrounding themselves in choking smoke, the tugs hauled her to a pier that proved to be occupied by the *S.S. Colonic*, which, with steam up and tugs waiting in their own overhang of smoke to lead her downstream, was boxed in by the intruder and her tugs. Smoke and steam were poured into the air before the jam was untangled in the suffocating pall.

Every available taxi was put on the streets in expectation of unusual business. "Stood to reason," defended Redwing Fleet dispatcher Howard Williams (no relation to Sam Williams, chief fireman for Lipp Novelties). "People getting off work, people

going to work, sky getting blacker by the minute. Sure, it was risky, but all hackies went real slow to avoid collisions. Sure, the meters kept running," he retorted to a question put to him by a reporter. "You think we're a charitable institution?"

At 10:15 A.M., Dr. Richard Grubel, who had relieved Dr. Hambro at the Battery weather station, sent a warning through official channels urging the mayor to forbid all but the most necessary smoke production. The mayor called the heads of departments into conference.

By this time, the city was completely blacked out. Lights were burning in offices, homes, factories, streets. To meet the power demand, every generator was put into operation. The mayor's conference agreed that that was necessary. So were transportation, heating and manufacture.

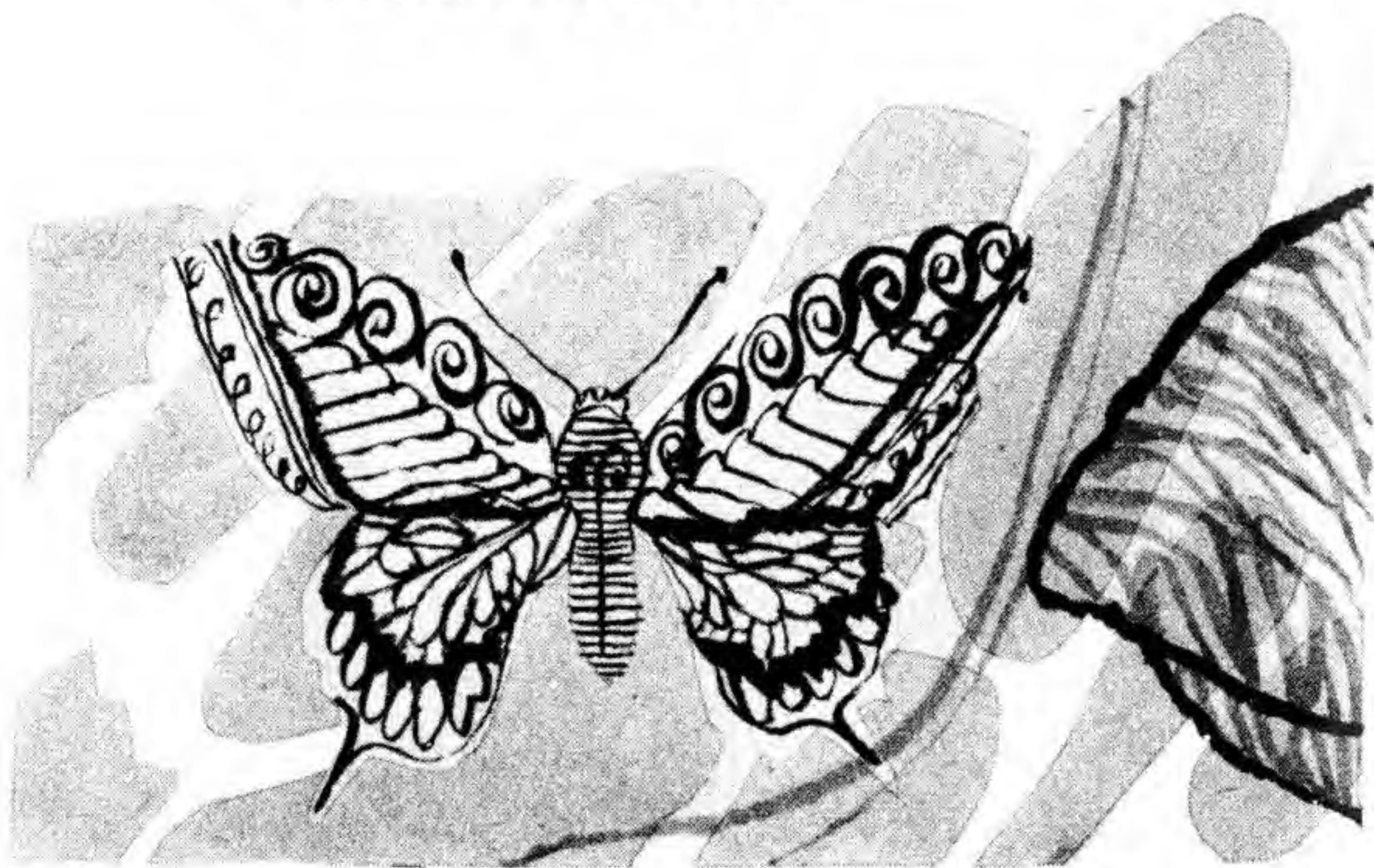
They adjourned with an order strictly forbidding suburbanite burning of rubbish.

At 3:03 P.M., Ned Snowden, TV repairman, left the office of his physician, Jerome Black, M.D., having had his irritated throat painted with argyrol. At 3:05, he sneezed on 48th Street between 5th and Madison. Argyrol, a silver compound, seeded the super-saturated air. Over 2,000,000 tons of soot, dust and water vapor fell on the city. — H. L. GOLD

Once

The mildest of men, Iversen was capable of murder . . . to disprove Harkaway's hypothesis that in the midst of life, we are in life!

Illustrated by DILLON



JUST two weeks before the *S. S. Herringbone* of the Interstellar Exploration, Examination (and Exploitation) Service was due to start her return journey to Earth, one of her scouts disconcertingly reported

the discovery of intelligent life in the Virago System.

"Thirteen planets," Captain Iversen snarled, wishing there were someone on whom he could place the blame for this mischance, "and we spend a full year

a Greech

By EVELYN E. SMITH



here exploring each one of them with all the resources of Terrestrial science and technology, and what happens? On the nineteenth moon of the eleventh planet, intelligent life is discovered. And who has to discover it? Harkaway,

of all people. I thought for sure all the moons were cinders or I would never have sent him out to them just to keep him from getting in my hair."

"The boy's not a bad boy, sir," the first officer said. "Just a

thought incompetent, that's all — which is to be expected if the Service will choose its officers on the basis of written examinations. I'm glad to see him make good."

Iversen would have been glad to see Harkaway make good, too, only such a concept seemed utterly beyond the bounds of possibility. From the moment the young man had first set foot on the *S. S. Herringbone*, he had seemed unable to make anything but bad. Even in such a conglomeration of fools under Captain Iverson, his idiocy was of outstanding quality.

THE captain, however, had not been wholly beyond reproach in this instance, as he himself knew. Pity he had made such an error about the eleventh planet's moons. It was really such a small mistake. Moons one to eighteen and twenty to forty-six still appeared to be cinders. It was all too easy for the spectroscope to overlook Flimbot, the nineteenth.

But it would be Flimbot which had turned out to be a green and pleasant planet, very similar to Earth. Or so Harkaway reported on the intercom.

"And the other forty-five aren't really moons at all," he began. "They're —"

"You can tell me all that when we reach Flimbot," Iversen interrupted, "which should be in about

six hours. Remember, that intercom uses a lot of power and we're tight on fuel."

But it proved to be more than six days later before the ship reached Flimbot. This was owing to certain mechanical difficulties that arose when the crew tried to lift the mother ship from the third planet, on which it was based. For sentimental reasons, the IEE(E) always tried to establish its prime base on the third planet of a system. Anyhow, when the *Herringbone* was on the point of takeoff, it was discovered that the rock-eating species which was the only life on the third planet had eaten all the projecting metal parts on the ship, including the rocket-exhaust tubes, the airlock handles and the chromium trim.

"I had been wondering what made the little fellows so sick," Smullyan, the ship's doctor, said. "They went wump, wump, wump all night long, until my heart bled for them. Ah, everywhere it goes, humanity spreads the fell seeds of death and destruction —"

"Are you a doctor or a veterinarian?" Iversen demanded furiously. "By Betelgeuse, you act as if I'd crammed those blasted tubes down their stinking little throats!"

"It was you who invaded their paradise with your ship. It was you —"

"Shut up!" Iversen yelled. "Shut

up, shut up, shut up, shut up!"

So Dr. Smullyan went off, like many a ship's physician before him, and got good and drunk on the medical stores.

BY THE time they finally arrived on Flimbot, Harkaway had already gone native. He appeared at the airlock wearing nothing but a brief, colorful loincloth of alien fabric and a wreath of flowers in his hair. He was fondling a large, woolly pink caterpillar.

"Where is your uniform, sir!" Captain Iversen barked, aghast. If there was one thing he was intolerant of in his command, it was sloppiness.

"This is the undress uniform of the Royal Flimbotzi Navy, sir. I was given the privilege of wearing one as a great *msu'gri* — honor — to our race. If I were to return to my own uniform, it might set back diplomatic relations between Flimbot and Earth as much as —"

"All right!" the captain snapped. "All right, all right, all right!"

He didn't ask any questions about the Royal Flimbotzi Navy. He had deduced its nature when, on nearing Flimbot, he had discovered that the eleventh planet actually had only one moon. The other forty-five celestial objects were spacecraft, quaint and primitive, it was true, but spacecraft

nonetheless. Probably it was their orbital formation that had made him think they were moons. Oh, the crew must be in great spirits; they did so enjoy having a good laugh at his expense!

He looked for something with which to reproach Harkaway, and his eye lighted on the caterpillar. "What's that thing you're carrying there?" he barked.

Raising itself on its tail, the caterpillar barked right back at him.

Captain Iversen paled. First he had overlooked the spacecraft, and now, after thirty years of faithful service to the IEE(E) in the less desirable sectors of space, he had committed the ultimate error in his first contact with a new form of intelligent life!

"Sorry, sir," he said, forgetting that the creature — whatever its mental prowess — could hardly be expected to understand Terran yet. "I am just a simple spaceman and my ways are crude, but I mean no harm." He whirled on Harkaway. "I thought you said the natives were humanoid."

The young officer grinned. "They are. This is just a greech. Cuddly little fellow, isn't he?" The greech licked Harkaway's face with a tripartite blue tongue. "The Flimbotzik are mad about pets. Great animal-lovers. That's how I knew I could trust them right from the start. Show me a

life-form that loves animals, I always say, and —”

“I’m not interested in what you always say,” Iversen interrupted, knowing Harkaway’s premise was fundamentally unsound, because he himself was the kindest of all men, and he hated animals. And, although he didn’t hate Harkaway, who was not an animal, save in the strictly Darwinian sense, he could not repress unsportsmanlike feelings of bitterness.

WHY couldn’t it have been one of the other officers who had discovered the Flimbotzik? Why must it be Harkaway — the most inept of his scouts, whose only talent seemed to be the egregious error, who always rushed into a thing half-cocked, who mistook superficialities for profundities, Harkaway, the blundering fool, the blithering idiot — who had stumbled into this greatest discovery of Iversen’s career? And, of course, Harkaway’s, too. Well, life was like that and always had been.

“Have you tested those air and soil samples yet?” Iversen snarled into his communicator, for his spacesuit was beginning to itch again as the gentle warmth of Flimbot activated certain small and opportunistic life-forms which had emigrated from a previous system along with the Terrans.

“We’re running them through as fast as we can, sir,” said a harried voice. “We can offer you no more than our poor best.”

“But why bother with all that?” Harkaway wanted to know. “This planet is absolutely safe for human life. I can guarantee it personally.”

“On what basis?” Iversen asked.

“Well, I’ve been here two weeks and I’ve survived, haven’t I?”

“That,” Iversen told him, “does not prove that the planet can sustain human life.”

Harkaway laughed richly. “Wonderful how you can still keep that marvelous sense of humor, Skipper, after all the things that have been going wrong on the voyage. Ah, here comes the *flim’tuu* — the welcoming committee,” he said quickly. “They were a little shy before. Because of the rockets, you know.”

“Don’t their ships have any?”

“They don’t seem to. They’re really very primitive affairs, barely able to go from planet to planet.”

“If they go,” Iversen said, “stands to reason *something* must power them.”

“I really don’t know what it is,” Harkaway retorted defensively. “After all, even though I’ve been busy as a beaver, three weeks would hardly give me time to investigate every aspect of their culture. . . Don’t you think the

natives are remarkably humanoid?" he changed the subject.

They were, indeed. Except for a somewhat greenish cast of countenance and distinctly purple hair, as they approached, in their brief, gay garments and flower garlands, the natives resembled nothing so much as a group of idealized South Sea Islanders of the nineteenth century.

Gigantic butterflies whizzed about their heads. Countless small animals frisked about their feet — more of the pink caterpillars; bright blue creatures that were a winsome combination of monkey and koala; a kind of large, merry-eyed snake that moved by holding its tail in its mouth and rolling like a hoop. All had faces that reminded the captain of the work of the celebrated twentieth-century artist W. Disney.

"BY POLARIS," he cried in disgust, "I might have known you'd find a cute planet!"

"Moon, actually," the first officer said, "since it is in orbit around Virago XI, rather than Virago itself."

"Would you have wanted them to be hostile?" Harkaway asked peevishly. "Honestly, some people never seem to be satisfied."

From his proprietary airs, one would think Harkaway had created the natives himself. "At least, with hostile races, you know

where you are," Iversen said. "I always suspect friendly life-forms. Friendliness simply isn't a natural instinct."

"Who's being anthropomorphic now!" Harkaway chided.

Iversen flushed, for he had berated the young man for that particular fault on more than one occasion. Harkaway was too prone to interpret alien traits in terms of terrestrial culture. Previously, since all intelligent life-forms with which the *Herringbone* had come into contact had already been discovered by somebody else, that didn't matter too much. In this instance, however, any mistakes of contact or interpretation mattered terribly. And Iversen couldn't see Harkaway not making a mistake; the boy simply didn't have it in him.

"You know you're superimposing our attitude on theirs," the junior officer continued tactlessly. "The Flimbotzik are a simple, friendly, *shig-livi* people, closely resembling some of our historical primitives — in a nice way, of course."

"None of our primitives had space travel," Iversen pointed out.

"Well, you couldn't really call those things spaceships," Harkaway said deprecatingly.

"They go through space, don't they? I don't know what else you'd call them."

"One judges the primitiveness

of a race by its cultural and technological institutions," Harkaway said, with a lofty smile. "And these people are laughably backward. Why, they even believe in reincarnation — *mpoola*, they call it."

"How do you know all this?" Iversen demanded. "Don't tell me you profess to speak the language already?"

"It's not a difficult language," Harkaway said modestly, "and I have managed to pick up quite a comprehensive smattering. I dare say I haven't caught all the nuances — *heeka lob peeka*, as the Flimbotzik themselves say — but they are a very simple people and probably they don't have —"

"Are we going to keep them waiting," Iversen asked, "while we discuss nuances? Since you say you speak the language so well, suppose you make them a pretty speech all about how the Earth government extends the — I suppose it would be hand, in this instance — of friendship to Flimbot and —"

Harkaway blushed. "I sort of did that already, acting as your deputy. *Mpoo* — status — means so much in these simple societies, you know, and they seemed to expect something of the sort. However, I'll introduce you to the Flimflim—the king, you know—" he pointed to an imposing individual in the forefront of the

crowd — "and get over all the amenities, shall I?"

"It would be jolly good of you," Iversen said frigidly.

IT WAS a pity they hadn't discovered Flimbot much earlier in their survey of the Virago System, Iversen thought with regret, because it was truly a pleasant spot and a week was very little time in which to explore a world and study a race, even one as simple as the gentle Flimbotzik actually turned out to be. It seemed amazing that they should have developed anything as advanced as space travel, when their only ground conveyances were a species of wagon drawn by plookik, a species of animal.

But Iversen had no time for further investigation. The *Herringbone's* fuel supply was calculated almost to the minute and so, willy-nilly, the Earthmen had to leave beautiful Flimbot at the end of the week, knowing little more about the Flimbotzik than they had before they came. Only Harkaway, who had spent the three previous weeks on Flimbot, had any further knowledge of the Flimbotzik — and Iversen had little faith in any data he might have collected.

"I don't believe Harkaway knows the language nearly as well as he pretends to," Iversen told the first officer as both of them

watched the young lieutenant make the formal speech of farewell.

"Come now," the first officer protested. "Seems to me the boy is doing quite well. Acquired a remarkable command of the language, considering he's been here only four weeks."

"Remarkable, I'll grant you, but is it accurate?"

"He seems to communicate and that is the ultimate objective of language, is it not?"

"Then why did the Flimbotzik fill the tanks with wine when I distinctly told him to ask for water?"

Of course the ship could synthesize water from its own waste products, if necessary, but there was no point in resorting to that expedient when a plentiful supply of pure H₂O was available on the world.

"A very understandable error, sir. Harkaway explained it to me. It seems the word for water, *m'koog*, is very similar to the word for wine, *mk'oog*. Harkaway himself admits his pronunciation isn't perfect and —"

"All right," Iversen interrupted. "What I'd like to know is what happened to the *mk'oog*, then —"

"The *m'koog*, you mean? It's in the tanks."

"— because, when they came to drain the wine out of the tanks to put the water in, the tanks

were already totally empty."

"I have no idea," the first officer said frostily, "no idea at all. If you'll glance at my papers, you'll note I'm Temperance by affiliation, but if you'd like to search my cabin, anyway, I —"

"By Miapacidus, man," Iversen exclaimed, "I wasn't accusing you! Of that, anyway!"

Everybody on the vessel was so confoundedly touchy. Lucky they had a stable commanding officer like himself, or morale would simply go to pot.

"**W**ELL, it's all over," Harkaway said, joining them up at the airlock in one lithe bound — a mean feat in that light gravity. "And a right good speech, if I do say so myself. The Flimflim says he will count the thlubbzik with ardent expectation until the mission from Earth arrives with the promised gifts."

"Just what gifts did you take it upon yourself to —" Iversen began, when he was interrupted by a voice behind them crying, "Woe, woe, woe!"

And, thrusting himself past the three other officers, Dr. Smullyan addressed the flim'puu, or farewell committee, assembled outside the ship. "Do not let the Earthmen return to your fair planet, O happily ignorant Flimbotzik," he declaimed, "lest wretchedness and misery be your

lot as a result. Tell them, 'Hence!' Tell them, 'Begone!' Tell them, 'Avaunt!' For, know ye, humanity is a blight, a creeping canker —"

He was interrupted by the captain's broad palm clamping down over his mouth.

"Clap him in the brig, somebody, until we get clear of this place," Iversen ordered wearily. "If Harkaway could pick up the Flimbotzi language, the odds are that some of the natives have picked up Terran."

"That's right, always keep belittling me," Harkaway said sulkily as two of the crewmen carried off the struggling medical officer, who left an aromatic wake behind him that bore pungent testimonial to where a part, at least, of the *mk'oog* had gone. "No wonder it took me so long to find myself."

"Oh, have you found yourself at last?" Iversen purred. "Splendid! Now that you know where you are, supposing you do me a big favor and go lose yourself again while we make ready for blastoff."

"For shame," said the first officer as Harkaway stamped off. "For shame!"

"The captain's a hard man," observed the chief petty officer, who was lounging negligently against a wall, doing nothing.

"Ay, that he is," agreed the crewman who was assisting him.

"That he is — a hard man, indeed."

"By Caroli, be quiet, all of you!" Iversen yelled. The very next voyage, he was going to have a new crew if he had to transfer to Colonization to do it! Even colonists couldn't be as obnoxious as the sons of space with which he was cursed.

IT WAS only after the *Herringbone* had left the Virago System entirely that Iversen discovered Harkaway had taken the greech along.

"But you can't abscond with one of the natives' pets!" he protested, overlooking, for the sake of rhetoric, the undeniable fact that Harkaway had already done so and that there could be no turning back. It would expend too much precious fuel and leave them stranded for life on Virago XI^a.

"Nonsense, sir!" Harkaway retorted. "Didn't the Flimflim say everything on Flimbot was mine? *Thlu'pt shig-nliv, snusnigg bnig-nliv* were his very words. Anyhow, they have plenty more greechi. They won't miss this little one."

"But he may have belonged to someone," Iversen objected. "An incident like this could start a war."

"I don't see how he could have belonged to anyone. Followed me around most of the time I was

there. We've become great pals, haven't we, little fellow?" He ruffled the greech's pink fur and the creature gave a delighted squeal.

Iversen could already see that the greechik were going to be Flimbot's first lucrative export. From time immemorial, the people of Earth had been susceptible to cuddly little life-forms, which was why Earth had nearly been conquered by the zz¹¹ from Sirius VII, before they discovered them to be hostile and quite intelligent life-forms rather than a new species of tabby.

"Couldn't bear to leave him," Harkaway went on as the greech draped itself around his shoulders and regarded Iversen with large round blue eyes. "The Flimflim won't mind, because I promised him an elephant."

"You mean the diplomatic mission will have to waste valuable cargo space on an *elephant*!" Iversen sputtered. "And you should know, if anyone does, just how spacesick an elephant can get. By Pherkad, Lieutenant Harkaway, you had no authority to make any promises to the Flimflim!"

"I discovered the Flimbotzik," Harkaway said sullenly. "I learned the language. I established rapport. Just because you happen to be the commander of this expedition doesn't mean you're God, Captain Iversen!"

"Harkaway," the captain barked, "this smacks of downright mutiny! Go to your cabin forthwith and memorize six verses of the Spaceman's Credo!"

THE greech lifted its head and barked back at Iversen, again. "That's my brave little watch-greech," Harkaway said fondly. "As a matter of fact, sir," he told the captain, "that was just what I was proposing to do myself. Go to my cabin, I mean; I have no time to waste on inferior prose. I plan to spend the rest of the voyage, or such part as I can spare from my duties —"

"You're relieved of them," Iversen said grimly.

"— working on my book. It's all about the doctrine of *mpoola* — reincarnation, or, if you prefer, metempsychosis. The Flimbotzi religion is so similar to many of the earlier terrestrial theologies — Hindu, Greek, Egyptian, Southern Californian — that sometimes one is almost tempted to stop and wonder if simplicity is not the essence of truth."

Iversen knew that, for the sake of discipline, he should not, once he had ordered Harkaway to his cabin, stop to bandy words, but he was a chronic word-bandier, having inherited the trait from his stalwart Viking ancestors. "How can you have learned all about their religion, their doctrine of re-

incarnation, in just four ridiculously short weeks?"

"It's a gift," Harkaway said modestly.

"Go to your cabin, sir! No, wait a moment!" For, suddenly overcome by a strange, warm, utterly repulsive emotion, Iversen pointed a quivering finger at the caterpillar. "Did you bring along the proper food for that—that thing? Can't have him starving, you know," he added gruffly. After all, he was a humane man, he told himself; it wasn't that he found the creature tugging at his heart-strings, or anything like that.

"Oh, he'll eat anything we eat, sir. As long as it's not meat. All the species on Flimbot are herbivores. I can't figure out whether the Flimbotzik themselves are vegetarians because they practice *mpoola*, or practice *mpoola* because they're —"

"I don't want to hear another word about *mpoola* or about Flimbot!" Iversen yelled. "Get out of here! And stay away from the library!"

"I have already exhausted its painfully limited resources, sir." Harkaway saluted with grace and withdrew to his cabin, wearing the greech like an affectionate lei about his neck.

IVERSEN heard no more about *mpoola* from Harkaway — who, though he did not remain

confined to his cabin when he had pursuits to pursue in other parts of the ship, at least had the tact to keep out of the captain's way as much as possible — but the rest of his men seemed able to talk of nothing else. The voyage back from a star system was always longer in relative terms than the voyage out, because the thrill of new worlds to explore was gone; already anticipating boredom, the men were ripe for almost any distraction.

On one return voyage, the whole crew had set itself to the study of Hittite with very creditable results. On another, they had all devoted themselves to the ancient art of alchemy, and, after nearly blowing up the ship, had come up with an elixir which, although not the quintessence — as they had, in their initial enthusiasm, alleged — proved to be an effective cure for hiccups. Patented under the name of Herringbone Hiccup Shoo, it brought each one of them an income which would have been enough to support them in more than modest comfort for the rest of their lives.

However, the adventurous life seemed to exert an irresistible lure upon them and they all shipped upon the *Herringbone* again — much to the captain's dismay, for he had hoped for a fresh start with a new crew and

there seemed to be no way of getting rid of them short of reaching retirement age.

The men weren't quite ready to accept *mpoola* as a practical religion — Harkaway hadn't finished his book yet — but as something very close to it. The concept of reincarnation had always been very appealing to the human mind, which would rather have envisaged itself perpetuated in the body of a cockroach than vanishing completely into nothingness.

"It's all so logical, sir," the first officer told Iversen. "The individuality or the soul or the psyche — however you want to look at it — starts the essentially simple cycle of life as a greech —"

"Why as a greech?" Iversen asked, humoring him for the moment. "There are lower life-forms on Flimbot."

"I don't know." The first officer sounded almost testy. "That's where Harkaway starts the progression."

"Harkaway! Is there no escaping that cretin's name?"

"Sir," said the first officer, "may I speak frankly?"

"No," Iversen said, "you may not."

"Your skepticism arises less from disbelief than from the fact that you are jealous of Harkaway because it was he who made the great discovery, not you."

"WHICH great discovery?" Iversen asked, sneering to conceal his hurt at being so overwhelmingly misunderstood. "Flimbot or *mpoola*?"

"Both," the first officer said. "You refuse to accept the fact that this hitherto incompetent youth has at last blossomed forth in the lambent colors of genius, just as the worthy greech becomes a zkoort, and the clean-living zkoort in his turn passes on to the next higher plane of existence, which is, in the Flimbotzik scale —"

"Spare me the theology, please," Iversen begged. "Once a greech, always a greech, I say. And I can't help thinking that somehow, somewhere, Harkaway has committed some horrible error."

"Humanity is frail, fumbling, futile," Dr. Smullyan declared, coming upon them so suddenly that both officers jumped. "To err is human, to forgive divine, and I am an atheist, thank God!"

"That *mk'oog* is powerful stuff," the first officer said. "Or so they tell me," he added.

"This is more than mere *mk'oog*," Iversen said sourly. "Smullyan has been too long in space. It hits everyone in the long run — some sooner than others."

"Captain," the doctor said, ignoring these remarks as he ignored everything not on a cosmic level, which included the crew's

ailments, "I am in full agreement with you. Young Harkaway has doomed that pretty little planet —"

"Moon," the first officer corrected. "It's a satellite, not a —"

"We ourselves were doomed *ab origine*, but the tragic flaw inherent in each one of our pitiful species is contagious, dooming all with whom we come in contact. And Harkaway is the most infectious carrier on the ship. Woe, I tell you. Woe!" And, with a hollow moan, the doctor left them to meditate upon the state of their souls, while he went off to his secret stores of oblivion.

"Wonder where he's hidden that *mk'oog*," Iversen brooded. "I've turned the ship inside out and I haven't been able to locate it."

The first officer shivered. "Somehow, although I know Smullyan's part drunk, part mad, he makes me a little nervous. He's been right so often on all the other voyages."

"Ruchbah!" Iversen said, not particularly grateful for support from such a dithyrambic source as the ship's medical officer. "Anyone who prophesies doom has a hundred per cent chance of ultimately being right, if only because of entropy."

He was still brooding over the first officer's thrust, even though he had been well aware that most of his officers and men considered

him a sorehead for doubting Harkaway in the young man's moment of triumph. However, Iversen could not believe that Harkaway had undergone such a radical transformation. Even on the basis of *mpoola*, one obviously had to die before passing on to the next existence and Harkaway had been continuously alive — from the neck down, at least.

Furthermore, all that aside, Iversen just couldn't see Harkaway going on to a higher plane. Although he supposed the young man was well-meaning enough — he'd grant him that negligible virtue — wouldn't it be terrible to have a system of existence in which one was advanced on the basis of intent rather than result? The higher life-forms would degenerate into primitivism.

But weren't the Flimbotzik virtually primitive? Or so Harkaway had said, for Iversen himself had not had enough contact with them to determine their degree of sophistication, and only the spaceships gave Harkaway's claim the lie.

I IVERSEN condescended to take a look at the opening chapter of Harkaway's book, just to see what the whole thing was about. The book began:

"What is the difference between life and death? Can we say defi-

nitely and definitively that life is life and death is death? Are we sure that death is not life and life is not death?

"No, we are not sure!

"Must the individuality have a corporeal essence in which to enshroud itself before it can proceed in its rapt, inexorable progress toward the Ultimate Non-actuality? And even if such be needful, why must the personal essence be trammelled by the same old worn-out habiliments of error?

"Think upon this!

"What is the extremest intensification of individuality? It is the All-encompassing Nothingness. Of what value are the fur, the feathers, the skin, the temporal trappings of imperfection in our perpetual struggle toward the final undefinable resolution into the Infinite Interplay of Cosmic Forces?

"Less than nothing!"

At this point, Iversen stopped reading and returned the manuscript to its creator, without a word. This last was less out of self-restraint than through sheer semantic inadequacy.

The young man might have spent his time more profitably in a little research on the biology or social organization of the Flimbotzik, Iversen thought bitterly when he had calmed down, thus saving the next expedition some work. But, instead, he'd been blinded by the flashy theological

aspects of the culture and, as a result, the whole crew had gone metempsychotic.

This was going to be one of the *Herringbone's* more unendurable voyages, Iversen knew. And he couldn't put his foot down effectively, either, because the crew, all being gentlemen of independent means now, were outrageously independent.

However, in spite of knowing that all of them fully deserved what they got, Iversen couldn't help feeling guilty as he ate steak while the other officers consumed fish, vegetables and eggs in an aura of unbearable virtue.

"But if the soul transmigrates and not the body," he argued, "what harm is there in consuming the vacated receptacle?"

"For all you know," the first officer said, averting his eyes from Iversen's plate with a little — wholly gratuitous, to the captain's mind — shudder, "that cow might have housed the psyche of your grandmother."

"Well, then, by indirectly participating in that animal's slaughter, I have released my grandmother from her physical bondage to advance to the next plane. That is, if she was a good cow."

"You just don't understand," Harkaway said. "Not that you could be expected to."

"He's a clod," the radio operator agreed. "Forgive me, sir," he

apologized as Iversen turned to glare incredulously at him, "but, according to *mpoola*, candor is a Step Upward."

"Onward and Upward," Harkaway commented, and Iversen was almost sure that, had he not been there, the men would have bowed their heads in contemplation, if not actual prayer.

AS TIME went on, the greech thrived and grew remarkably stout on the Earth viands, which it consumed in almost improbable quantities. Then, one day, it disappeared and its happy squeal was heard no longer.

There was much mourning aboard the *Herringbone* — for, with its lovable personality and innocently engaging ways, the little fellow had won its way into the hearts of all the spacemen — until the first officer discovered a substantial pink cocoon resting on the ship's control board and rushed to the intercom to spread the glad tidings. That was a breach of regulations, of course, but Iversen knew when not to crowd his fragile authority.

"I should have known there was some material basis for the spiritual doctrine of *mpoola*," Harkaway declared with tears in his eyes as he regarded the dormant form of his little pet. "Was it not the transformation of the caterpillar into the butterfly that

first showed us on Earth how the soul might emerge winged and beautiful from its vile house of clay? Gentlemen," he said, in a voice choked with emotion, "our little greech is about to become a zkoort. Praised be the Impersonal Being who has allowed such a miracle to take place before our very eyes. *J'goona lo mpoona*."

"Amen," said the first officer reverently.

All those in the control room bowed their heads except Iversen. And even he didn't quite have the nerve to tell them that the cocoon was pushing the *Herringbone* two points off course.

"TAKE that thing away before I lose my temper and clobber it," Iversen said impatiently as the zkoort dived low to buzz him, then whizzed just out of its reach on its huge, brilliant wings, giggling raucously.

"He was just having his bit of fun," the first officer said with reproach. "Have you no tolerance, Captain, no appreciation of the joys of golden youth?"

"A spaceship is no place for a butterfly," Iversen said, "especially a four-foot butterfly."

"How can you say that?" Harkaway retorted. "The *Herringbone* is the only spaceship that ever had one, to my knowledge. And I think I can safely say our lives are all a bit brighter and better

and *m'poo'p* for having a zkoort among us. Thanks be to the Divine Nonentity for —"

"Poor little butterfly," Dr. Smullyan declared sonorously, "living out his brief life span so far from the fresh air, the sunshine, the pretty flowers —"

"Oh, I don't know that it's as bad as all that," the first officer said. "He hangs around hydroponics a lot and he gets a daily ration of vitamins." Then he paled. "But that's right — a butterfly does live only a day, doesn't it?"

"It's different with a zkoort," Harkaway maintained stoutly, though he also, Iversen noted, lost his ruddy color. "After all, he isn't really a butterfly, merely an analogous life-form."

"My, my! In four weeks, you've mastered their entomology as well as their theology and language," Iversen jeered. "Is there no end to your accomplishments, Lieutenant?"

Harkaway's color came back twofold. "He's already been around half a *thubb*," he pointed out. "Over two weeks."

"Well, the thing is bigger than a Terrestrial butterfly," Iversen conceded, "so you have to make some allowances for size. On the other hand —"

Laughing madly, the zkoort swooped down on him. Iversen beat it away with a snarl.

"Playful little fellow, isn't he?" the first officer said, with thoroughly annoying fondness.

"He likes you, Skipper," Harkaway explained. "*Urg'h n gurg'h* — or, to give it the crude Terran equivalent, living is loving. He can tell that beneath that grizzled and seemingly harsh exterior of yours, Captain —"

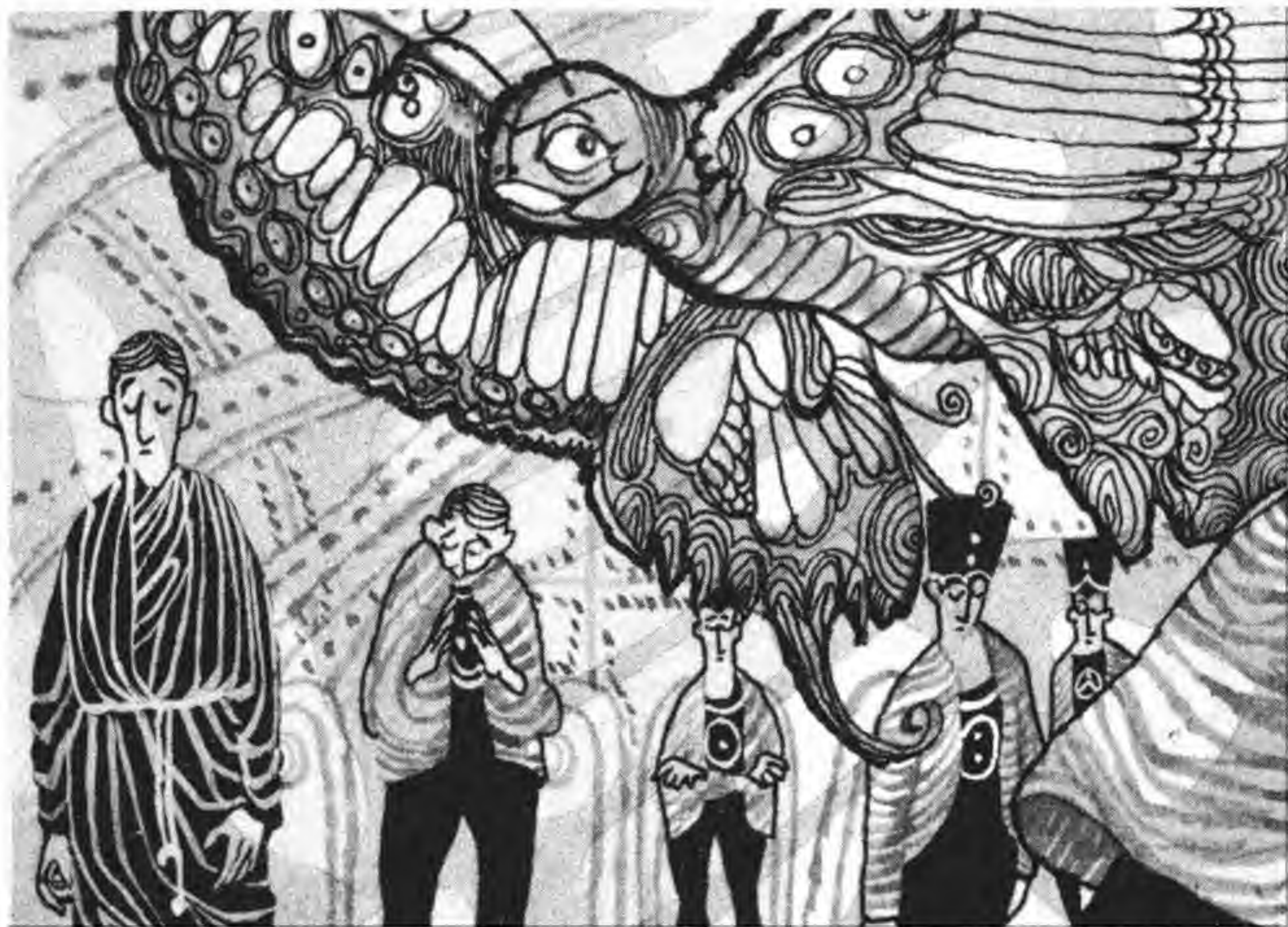
But, with a scream of rage, Iversen had locked himself into his cabin. Outside, he could hear the zkoort beating its wings against the door and wailing disappointedly.

SOME days later, a pair of rapidly dulling wings were found on the floor of the hydroponics chamber. But of the zkoort's little body, there was no sign. An air of gloom and despondency hung over the *Herringbone* and even Iversen felt a pang, though he would never admit it without brainwashing.

During the next week, the men, seeking to forget their loss, plunged themselves into *mpoola* with real fanaticism. Harkaway took to wearing some sort of ecclesiastical robes which he whipped up out of the recreation room curtains. Iversen had neither the heart nor the courage to stop him, though this, too, was against regulations. Everyone except Iversen gave up eating fish and eggs in addition to meat.

Then, suddenly, one day a roly-poly blue animal appeared at the officers mess, claiming everyone as an old friend with loud squeals of joy. This time, Iversen was the only one who was glad to see him — really glad.

"Of course, it does kind of knock your theory of the transmigration of souls into a cocked hat," the captain grinned. "Because, in order for the soul to transmigrate, the previous body's got to be dead, and I'm afraid our



"Aren't you happy to see your little friend again, Harkaway?" he asked, scratching the delighted animal between the ears.

"Why, sure," Harkaway said, putting his fork down and leaving his vegetable *macédoine* virtually untasted. "Sure. I'm very happy —" his voice broke — "very happy."

little pal here was alive all the time."

"Looks it, doesn't it?" muttered Harkaway.

"I rather think," Iversen went on, tickling the creature under the chin until it squealed happily, "that you didn't *quite* get the nuances of the language, did you, Harkaway? Because I gather now

that the whole difficulty was a semantic one. The Flimbotzik were explaining the zoology of the native life-forms to you and you misunderstood it as their theology."

"Looks it, doesn't it?" Harka-

AT THIS point, the radio operator almost sobbingly asked to be excused from the table. Following his departure, there was a long silence. It was hard, Iversen realized in a burst of uncharacteristic tolerance, to have one's be-



way repeated glumly. "It certainly looks it."

"Cheer up," Iversen said, reaching over to slap the young man on the back—a bit to his own amazement. "No real harm done. What if the Flimbotzik are less primitive than you fancied? It makes our discovery the more worthwhile, doesn't it?"

lief, even so newly born a credo, annihilated with such suddenness.

"After all, you did run across the Flimbotzik first," he told Harkaway as he spread gooseberry jam on a hard roll for the ravenous ex-zkoort (now a chu-wugg, he had been told). "That's the main thing, and a life-form

that passes through two such striking metamorphoses is not unfraught with interest. You shall receive full credit, my boy, and your little mistake doesn't mean a thing except —"

"Doom," said Dr. Smullyan, sopping up the last of his gravy with a piece of bread. "Doom, doom, doom." He stuffed the bread into his mouth.

"Look, Smullyan," Iversen told him jovially, "you better watch out. If you keep talking that way, next voyage out we'll sign on a parrot instead of a medical officer. Cheaper and just as efficient."

Only the chu-wugg joined in his laughter.

"Ever since I can remember," the first officer said, looking gloomily at the doctor, "he's never been wrong. Maybe *he* has powers beyond our comprehension. Perhaps we sought at the end of the Galaxy what was in our own back yard all the time."

"Who was seeking what?" Iversen asked as all the officers looked at Smullyan with respectful awe. "I demand an answer!"

But the only one who spoke was the doctor. "Only Man is vile," he said, as if to himself, and fell asleep with his head on the table.

"Make a cult out of Smullyan," Iversen warned the others, "and I'll scuttle the ship!"

Later on, the first officer got the

captain alone. "Look here, sir," he began tensely, "have you read Harkaway's book about *mpoola*?"

"I read part of the first chapter," Iversen told him, "and that was enough. Maybe to Harkaway it's eschatology, but to me it's just plain scatology!"

"But —"

"Why in Zubeneshchamali," Iversen said patiently, "should I waste my time reading a book devoted to a theory which has already been proved erroneous? Answer me that!"

"I think you should have a look at the whole thing," the first officer persisted.

"Baham!" Iversen replied, but amiably enough, for he was in rare good humor these days. And he needed good humor to tolerate the way his officers and men were behaving. All right, they had made idiots of themselves; that was understandable, expected, familiar. But it wasn't the chu-wugg's fault. Iversen had never seen such a bunch of soreheads. Why did they have to take their embarrassment and humiliation out on an innocent little animal?

For, although no one actually mistreated the chu-wugg, the men avoided him as much as possible. Often Iversen would come upon the little fellow weeping from loneliness in a corner with no one to play with and, giving in to his own human weakness, the captain

would dry the creature's tears and comfort him. In return, the chu-wugg would laugh at all his jokes, for he seemed to have acquired an elementary knowledge of Terran.

"BY Vindemiatrix, Lieutenant," the captain roared as Harkaway, foiled in his attempt to scurry off unobserved, stood quivering before him, "why have you been avoiding me like this?"

"I didn't think I was avoiding you any particular way, sir," Harkaway said. "I mean does it appear like that, sir? It's only that I've been busy with my duties, sir."

"I don't know what's the matter with you! I told you I handsomely forgave you for your mistake."

"But I can never forgive myself, sir —"

"Are you trying to go over my head?" Iversen thundered.

"No, sir. I —"

"If I am willing to forgive you, you will forgive yourself. That's an order!"

"Yes, sir," the young man said feebly.

Harkaway had changed back to his uniform, Iversen noted, but he looked unkempt, ill, harrowed. The boy had really been suffering for his precipitance. Perhaps the captain himself had been a little hard on him.

Iversen modulated his tone to active friendliness. "Thought you might like to know the chu-wugg turned into a hoop-snake this morning!"

But Harkaway did not seem cheered by this social note. "Soon!"

"You knew there would be a fourth metamorphosis!" Iversen was disappointed. But he realized that Harkaway was bound to have acquired such fundamental data, no matter how he interpreted them. It was possible, Iversen thought, that the book could actually have some value, if there were some way of weeding fact from fancy, and surely there must be scholars trained in such an art, for Earth had many wholly indigenous texts of like nature.

"He's a thor'glitch now," Harkaway told him dully.

"And what comes next? . . . No, don't tell me. It's more fun not knowing beforehand. You know," Iversen went on, almost rubbing his hands together, "I think this species is going to excite more interest on Earth than the Flimbotzik themselves. After all, people are people, even if they're green, but an animal that changes shape so many times and so radically is really going to set biologists by the ears. What did you say the name of the species as a whole was?"

"I — I couldn't say, sir."

"Ah," Iversen remarked waggishly, "so there are one or two things you don't know about Flimbot, eh?"

Harkaway opened his mouth, but only a faint bleating sound came out.

AS THE days went on, Iversen found himself growing fonder and fonder of the thor'glitch. Finally, in spite of the fact that it had now attained the dimensions of a well-developed boa constrictor, he took it to live in his quarters.

Many was the quiet evening they spent together, Iversen entering acid comments upon the crew in the ship's log, while the thor'glitch looked over viewtapes from the ship's library.

The captain was surprised to find how much he — well, enjoyed this domestic tranquility. I must be growing old, he thought — old and mellow. And he named the creature Bridey, after a twentieth-century figure who had, he believed, been connected with another metempsychotic furor.

When the thor'glitch grew listless and began to swell in the middle, Iversen got alarmed and sent for Dr. Smullyan.

"Aha!" the medical officer declaimed, with a casual glance at the suffering snake. "The day of reckoning is at hand! Reap the fruit of your transgression, scurvy

humans! Calamity approaches with jets aflame!"

Iversen clutched the doctor's sleeve. "Is he — is he going to die?"

"Unhand me, presumptuous navigator!" Dr. Smullyan shook the captain's fingers off his arm. "I didn't say he was going to die," he offered in ordinary bedside tones. "Not being a specialist in this particular sector, I am not qualified to offer an opinion, but, strictly off the record, I would hazard the guess that he's about to metamorphose again."

"He never did it in public before," Iversen said worriedly.

"The old order changeth," Smullyan told him. "You'd better call Harkaway."

"What does he know!"

"Too little and, at the same time, too much," the doctor declaimed, dissociating himself professionally from the case. "Too much and too little. Eat, drink, be merry, iniquitous Earthmen, for you died yesterday!"

"Oh, shut up," Iversen said automatically, and dispatched a message to Harkaway with the information that the thor'glitch appeared to be metamorphosing again and that his presence was requested in the captain's cabin.

The rest of the officers accompanied Harkaway, all of them with the air of attending a funeral rather than a rebirth, Iversen

noted nervously. They weren't armed, though, so Bridey couldn't be turning into anything dangerous.

NOW it came to pass that the thor'glitch's mid-section, having swelled to unbearable proportions, began to quiver. Suddenly, the skin split lengthwise and dropped cleanly to either side, like a banana peel.

Iversen pressed forward to see what fresh life-form the bulging cavity had held. The other officers all stood in a somber row without moving, for all along, Iversen realized, they had known what to expect, what was to come. And they had not told him. But then, he knew, it was his own fault; he had refused to be told.

Now, looking down at the new life-form, he saw for himself what it was. Lying languidly in the thor'glitch skin was a slender youth of a pallor which seemed excessive even for a member of a green-skinned race. He had large limpid eyes and a smile of ineffable sweetness.

"By Nopus Secundus," Iversen groaned. "I'm sunk."

"Naturally the ultimate incarnation for a life-form would be humanoid," Harkaway said with deep reproach. "What else?"

"I'm surprised you didn't figure that out for yourself, sir," the first officer added. "Even if you did

refuse to read Harkaway's book, it seems obvious."

"Does it?" Smullyan challenged. "Does it, indeed? Is Man the highest form of life in an irrational cosmos? Then all causes are lost ones! . . . So many worlds," he muttered in more subdued tones, "so much to do, so little done, such things to be!"

"The Flimbotzik were telling Harkaway about their own life cycle," Iversen whispered as revelation bathed him in its murky light. "The human embryo undergoes a series of changes *inside* the womb. It's just that the Flimbotzik fetus develops *outside* the womb."

"Handily bypassing the earliest and most unpleasant stages of humanity," Smullyan sighed. "Oh, idyllic planet, where one need never be a child — where one need never see a child!"

"Then they were trying to explain their biology to you quite clearly and coherently, you lunk-head," Iversen roared at Harkaway, "and you took it for a religious doctrine!"

"Yes, sir," Harkaway said weakly. "I — I kind of figured that out myself in these last few weeks of intensive soul-searching. I — I'm sorry, sir. All I can say is that it was an honest mistake."

"Why, they weren't necessarily pet-lovers at all. Those animals they had with them were . . . By

Nair al Zaurak!" The captain's voice rose to a shriek as the whole enormity of the situation finally dawned upon him. "You went and kidnaped one of the children!"

"That's a serious charge, kidnaping," the first officer said with melancholy pleasure. "And you, as head of this expedition, Captain, are responsible. Ironical, isn't it?"

"Told you all this spelled doom and disaster," the doctor observed cheerfully.

JUST then, the young humanoid sat up — with considerable effort, Iversen was disturbed to notice. But perhaps that was one of the consequences of being born. A new-born infant was weak; why not a new-born adult, then?

"Why doom?" the humanoid asked in a high, clear voice. "Why disaster?"

"You — you speak Terran?" the captain stammered.

Bridey gave his sad, sweet smile. "I was reared amongst you. You are my people. Why should I not speak your tongue?"

"But we're not your people," Iversen blurted, thinking perhaps the youth did not remember back to his greechi days. "We're an entirely different species —"

"Our souls vibrate in unison and that is the vital essence. But do not be afraid, shipmates; the Flimbotzik do not regard the ab-





duction of a transitory corporeal shelter as a matter of any great moment. Moreover, what took place could not rightly be termed abduction, for I came with you of my own volition — and the Flimbotzik recognize individual responsibility from the very first moment of the psyche's drawing breath in any material casing."

Bridey talked so much like Harkaway's book that Iversen was almost relieved when, a few hours later, the alien died. Of course the captain was worried about possible repercussions from the governments of both Terra and Flimbot, in spite of Bridey's assurances.

And he could not help but feel a pang when the young humanoid expired in his arms, murmuring, "Do not grieve for me, soul-mates. In the midst of life, there is life. . ."

"Funny," Smullyan said, with one of his disconcerting returns to a professional manner, "all the other forms seemed perfectly healthy. Why did this one go like that? Almost as if he *wanted* to die."

"He was too good for this ship, that's what," the radio operator said, glaring at the captain. "Too fine and brave and—and noble."

"Yes," Harkaway agreed. "What truly sensitive soul could exist in a stultifying atmosphere like this?"

All the officers glared at the captain. He glared back with right good will. "How come you gentlemen are still with us?" he inquired. "One would have thought you would have perished of pure sensibility long since, then."

"It's not nice to talk that way," the chief petty officer burst out, "not with him lying there not yet cold. . . Ah," he heaved a long sigh, "we'll never see his like again."

"Ay, that we won't," agreed the crew, huddled in the corridor outside the captain's cabin.

Iversen sincerely hoped not, but he forbore to speak.

SINCE Bridey had reached the ultimate point in his life cycle, it seemed certain that he was not going to change into anything else and so he was given a spaceman's burial. Feeling like a put-upon fool, Captain Iversen read a short prayer as Bridey's slight body was consigned to the vast emptiness of space.

Then the airlock clanged shut behind the last mortal remains of the ill-fated extraterrestrial and that was the end of it.

But the funereal atmosphere did not diminish as the ship forged on toward Earth. Gloomy days passed, one after the other, during which no one spoke, save to issue or dispute an order. Looking at himself one day in the mir-

ror on his cabin wall, the captain realized that he was getting old. Perhaps he ought to retire instead of still dreaming of a new command and a new crew.

And then one day, as he sat in his cabin reading the Spaceman's Credo, the lights on the *Herringbone* went out, all at once, while the constant hum of the motors died down slowly, leaving a strange, uncomfortable silence. Iversen found himself suspended weightless in the dark, for the gravity, of course, had gone off with the power. What, he wondered, had come to pass? He often found himself thinking in such terms these days.

Hoarse cries issued from the passageway outside; then he heard a squeak as his cabin door opened and persons unknown floated inside, breathing heavily.

"The power has failed, sir!" gasped the first officer's voice.

"That has not escaped my notice," Iversen said icily. Were not even his last moments to be free from persecution?

"It's all that maniac Smullyan's fault. He stored his *mk'oog* in the fuel tanks. After emptying them out first, that is. We're out of fuel."

The captain put a finger in his book to mark his place, which was, he knew with a kind of supernal detachment, rather foolish, because there was no prospect of

there ever being lights to read by again.

"Put him in irons, if you can find him," he ordered. "And tell the men to prepare themselves gracefully for a lingering death."

Iversen could hear a faint creak as the first officer drew himself to attention in the darkness. "The men of the *Herringbone*, sir," he said, stiffly, "are always prepared for calamity."

"Ay, that we are," agreed various voices.

So they were all there, were they? Well, it was too much to expect that they would leave him in death any more than they had in life.

"It is well," Iversen said. "It is well," he repeated, unable to think of anything more fitting.

SUDDENLY the lights went on again and the ship gave a leap. From his sprawling position on the floor, amid his recumbent officers, Iversen could hear the hum of motors galvanized into life.

"But if the fuel tanks are empty," he asked of no one in particular, "where did the power come from?"

"I am the power," said a vast, deep voice that filled the ship from hold to hold.

"And the glory," said the radio operator reverently. "Don't forget the glory."

"No," the voice replied and it was the voice of Bridey, resonant with all the amplitude of the immense chest cavity he had acquired. "Not the glory, merely the power. I have reached a higher plane of existence. I am a spaceship."

"Praise be to the Ultimate Nothingness!" Harkaway cried.

"Ultimate Nothingness, nothing!" Bridey said impatiently. "I achieved it all myself."

"Then that's how the Flimbotzi spaceships were powered!" Iversen exclaimed. "By themselves — the Flimbotzik themselves, I mean —"

"Even so," Bridey replied grandly. "And this lofty form of life happens to be one which we poor humans cannot reach unassisted. Someone has to build the shell for us to occupy, which is the reason humans dwell together in fellowship and harmony —"

"You purposely got Harkaway to take you aboard the *Herringbone*," Iversen interrupted wrathfully. "You — you stowaway!"

Bridey's laugh rang through the ship, setting the loose parts quivering. "Of course. When first I set eyes upon this vessel of yours, I saw before me the epitome of all dreams. Never had any of our kind so splendid an encasement. And, upon determining that the vessel was, as yet, a soulless thing, I got myself aboard; I was

born, I died, and was reborn again with the greatest swiftness consonant with comfort, so that I could awaken in this magnificent form. Oh, joy, joy, joy!"

"You know," Iversen said, "now that I hear one of you talk at length, I really can't blame Harkaway for his typically imbecilic mistake."

"We are a wordy species," Bridey conceded.

"You had no right to do what you did," Iversen told him, "no right to take over —"

"But I didn't take over," Bridey the *Herringbone* said complacently. "I merely remained quiescent and content in the knowledge of my power until yours failed. Without me, you would even now be spinning in the vasty voids, a chrome-trimmed sepulcher. Now, three times as swiftly as before, shall I bear you back to the planet you very naively call home."

"Not three times as fast, please!" Iversen was quick to plead. "The ship isn't built — we're not built to stand such speeds."

THE ship sighed. "Disappointment needs must come to all — the high, the low, the man, the spaceship. It must be borne —" the voice broke — "bravely. Somehow."

"What am I going to do?" Iver-

sen asked, turning to the first officer for advice for the first time ever. "I was planning to ask for a transfer or resign my command when we got back to Earth. But how can I leave Bridey in the hands of the IEE(E)?"

"You can't, sir," the first officer said. "Neither can we."

"If you explain," Harkaway offered timidly, "perhaps they'll present the ship to the government."

Both Iversen and the first officer snorted, united for once. "Not the IEE(E)," Iversen said. "They'd — they'd exhibit it or something and charge admission."

"Oh, no," Bridey cried, "I don't want to be exhibited! I want to sail through the trackless paths of space. What good is a body like this if I cannot use it to its fullest?"

"Have no fear," Iversen assured it. "We'll just —" he shrugged, his dreams of escape forever blighted — "just have to buy the ship from the IEE(E), that's all."

"Right you are, sir," the first officer agreed. "We must club together, every man Jack of us, and buy her. Him. It. That's the only decent thing to do."

"Perhaps they won't sell," Harkaway worried. "Maybe —"

"Oh, they'll sell, all right," Iversen said wearily. "They'd sell the chairman of the board, if you made them an offer, and throw

in all the directors if the price was right."

"And then what will we do?" the first officer asked. "Once the ship has been purchased, what will our course be? What, in other words, are we to do?"

It was Bridey who answered. "We will speed through space seeking, learning, searching, until you — all of you — pass on to higher planes and, leaving the frail shells you now inhabit, occupy proud, splendid vessels like the one I wear now. Then, a vast transcendent flotilla, we will seek other universes. . ."

"But we don't become spaceships," Iversen said unhappily. "We don't become anything."

"How do you know we don't?" Smullyan demanded, appearing on the threshold. "How do you know what we become? Build thee more stately spaceships, O my soul!"

Above all else, Iversen was a space officer and dereliction of duty could not be condoned even in exceptional circumstances. "Put him in irons, somebody!"

"Ask Bridey why there were only forty-five spaceships on his planet!" the doctor yelled over his shoulder as he was dragged off. "Ask where the others went — where they are now."

But Bridey wouldn't answer that question.

— EVELYN E. SMITH

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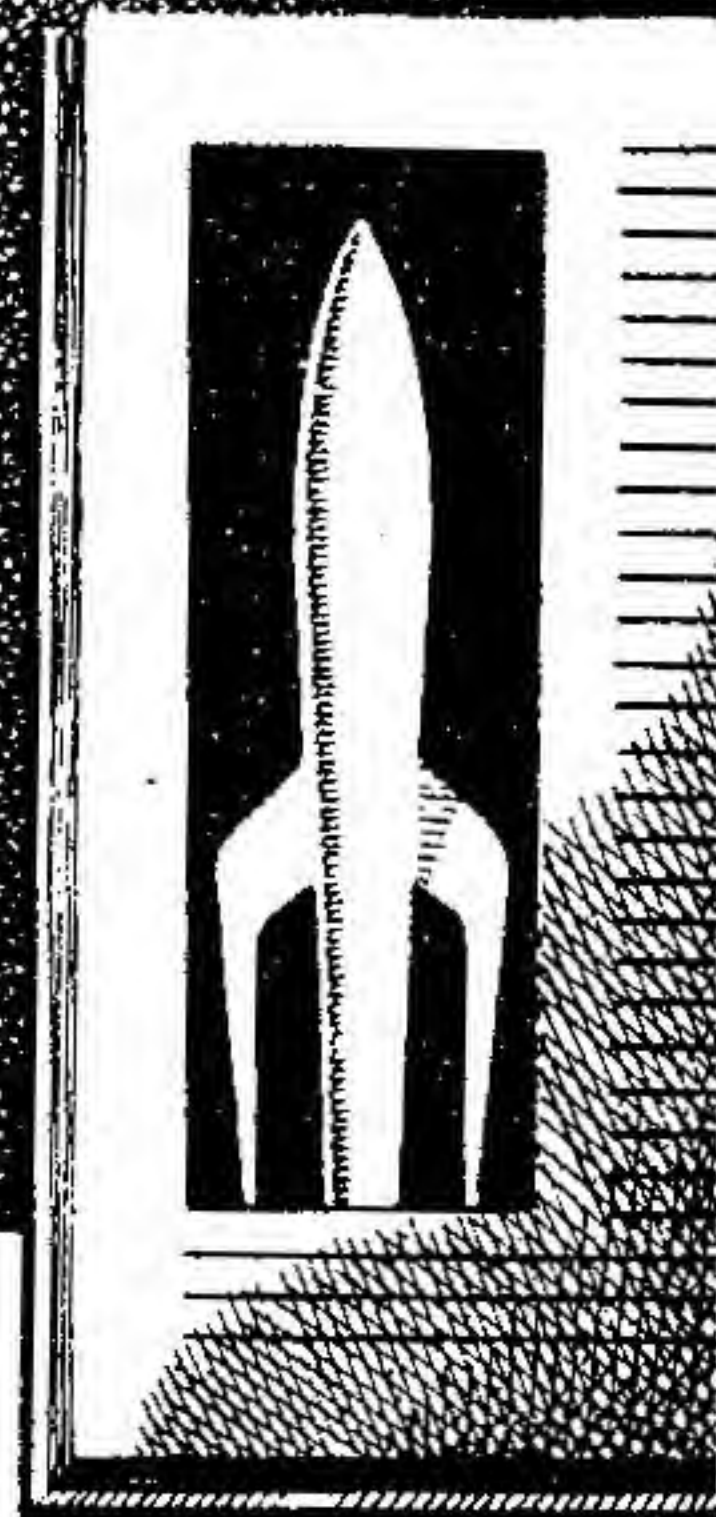
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